



## Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances

Rms 310-311, Philippine Social Science Center Building

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### ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Asian Democracy and Human Rights Award

Mary Aileen D. Bacalso, Secretary-General

Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances

Taipei, Taiwan

December 10, 2016

**Her Excellency President of Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen, Chairman of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, Mr. Su Jia-chyuan, President of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, Mr. Hsu Shu-chien, friends, ladies and gentlemen,**

On behalf of the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), whose member-organizations are located in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Thailand, Timor-Leste and our individual members in Laos and Switzerland, I would like to express our profound gratitude to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy for the recognition it has given to AFAD for its “*courage, leadership and vision.*” The heartening news of our winning the Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award came at a time when our Chairperson, Mr. Khurram Parvez, was persecuted – arbitrarily detained for 76 days by Indian authorities. Detained on 16 September, he was released on 30 November – barely more than a week ago.

Our Federation sincerely thanks Ms. Evelyn Balais-Serrano, former executive director of Forum Asia and Mr. Basil Fernando, director of the Asian Human Rights Commission for nominating our Federation to this very important human rights award. Their high level of credibility in the field of human rights has contributed in large measure to convincing the Board of Judges to bestow upon us a prestigious award that gives due recognition to our Federation’s contribution to the work of human rights in a region that, bereft of regional mechanisms for protection, bears the brunt of transgressions of human rights.

Enforced disappearance is a global phenomenon. It is a regional scourge in Asia as well. The UN WGEID reports 107 countries with outstanding cases of disappearances, majority of which are Asian. It has received 53,273 cases since its inception in 1980, of which 44,159 from 91 states remain active. These figures are no mere cold statistics. They signify precious lives....



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Our Federation believes that this award recognizes the sufferings of the victims of enforced disappearances and the relevance of the struggle against disappearances in the Asian continent that submitted the highest number of cases to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in recent years,. In Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor Leste, enforced disappearances occur in the context of poverty, social injustice, authoritarian rule, internal conflicts and war against terrorism including democratic governments. Disappearances are committed by agents of states, who deprive victims of lives and liberty and tear apart the very fabric of the family, the community and the larger society.

For the first time in 18 years, AFAD has been officially awarded for its accomplishments that stem from the sacrifices of thousands of families of the disappeared in Asia and the rest of the world. What AFAD has now achieved also springs from the courage and determination of our human rights defenders. Former AFAD chairperson, Munir was poisoned by arsenic in a Garuda flight from Jakarta to Amsterdam via Singapore in September 2004 and died on arrival in Amsterdam. Our present chairperson Khurram Parvez, was recently released after his more than two months of arbitrary detention in a jail in Jammu, 300 kilometers away from his family. They are among the many human rights defenders, who, in the course of their work, engendered the ire of states which, despite their democratic posturings, violate human rights.

Key outcomes of the Federation were identified during the announcement of the award, which include AFAD's role in the campaign for the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons From Enforced Disappearances. The Convention on Disappearances is indeed, a landmark victory in the international struggle against this global scourge. It is all the more important here in Asia wherein governments commit a significant number of cases and where strong regional mechanisms for protection are non-existent. Yet, the number of signatures and ratifications in this region is too few compared to the magnitude of the problem. And in the vast Asian continent, only the Philippines has a domestic law against disappearances , which was made possible through the efforts of our member-organizations in the country.



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Learning from the best practices in Central America, by partaking of the rich experience of reunifying stolen children with their biological parents in Guatemala and El Salvador, we are grateful to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy for the recognition of the victories of our Indonesian and Timorese member-organizations in the continuing process of search and reunification of the stolen children in Timor-Leste with their biological parents. Indeed, the reunification process is the most humanly gratifying outcome any organization working on the theme of enforced disappearance can achieve.

The Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award bestowed upon by the Taiwan Foundation For Democracy to AFAD will, in no small measure, amplify our voices, fortify our efforts and multiply our gains here in Asia. Coming from Taiwan, which has a common experience of enforced disappearances during an authoritarian rule, this award is a noble expression of friendship and solidarity which mean so much to us.

18 years ago, on 4 June 1998 against the backdrop of enforced disappearances in the Asian region and inspired by the Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of Disappeared-Detainees (FEDEFAM), AFAD was given birth to by three organizations, the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND) of the Philippines, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir and the now defunct Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared from Sri Lanka. It has grown to be a federation of 14 member-organizations from ten countries and three individual members from 2 countries.

18 years since AFAD's birth, we are receiving this award which we dedicate to all the disappeared in Asia and the rest of the world. They, who are spiritually present here and now, and in whose names we are receiving this award – they are the *desaparecidos*, the disappeared and in our language, *mga sapilitang winala*. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you, our beloved disappeared for keeping the flame burning in our hearts as we journey with you amidst seemingly insurmountable barriers. For implanting the seeds of democracy and human rights, for offering the supreme sacrifice of your lives, no words are adequate to thank you for the breath of inspiration, commitment and energy you are giving us in our long and arduous journey to attain our much-cherished dream for a world without disappeared persons. That day will certainly dawn upon us, perhaps not in our lifetime but for the next generations.



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*To the mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, children of the disappeared;*

*From whose bosom the desaparecidos were plucked;*

*You on whose lives, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances; was conceived and given birth to;*

*You who, in our day to day work, we link arms with;*

*You who have given meaning and substance to the work of our Federation;*

*For you and because of you, we have gone beyond geographical distance; transcend cultural, language, religious and political barriers;*

*In your honor, we struggle for solidarity in its most concrete terms;*

*For you and equally for your beloved desaparecidos,*

*We dedicate this hard-earned award, which should go a long way*

*Towards searching for the truth;*

*Overcoming the obstacles to justice;*

*Realizing the much-cherished dream for*

*Reparation, Memory and Non-repetition.*

*This award is dedicated to all of you and your beloved disappeared.*

Finally, may I reiterate with utmost gratitude to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy that the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances proudly accepts this prestigious award.

Thank you very much.