STATEMENT ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF
SUPER TYPHOOON YOLANDA/TROPICAL CYCLONE HAIYAN

It has been a year since Typhoon Yolanda (Int'l. Name Haiyan) has entered and devastated central parts of the Philippines. It left more than 6000 persons dead and more than 1 million homes damaged in its wake. This event sparked discussions about climate change as a clear danger to the Filipino people and tested the resiliency of community members and the resurgence of the bayanihan/community cooperation which every tribe and village in the country has traditionally practiced. There were also observations and lots of questions about disaster preparedness and risk reduction and management from the community level up to the national levels of government and the people.

Indigenous communities in Panay Island, other parts of Visayas and Mindanao, and Busuanga in Palawan were not spared by the super typhoon's devastation. While many eyes, ears and hearts of the people of the country and the world were sympathizing with victims from Tacloban, Samar and communities which were greatly covered by mass media, indigenous peoples seem to be not included. They also received minimum aid in the aftermath of the super typhoon.

The Tropical Cyclone Haiyan is a glaring manifestation of climate change and such occurrence may happen again in the near future. Climate change is a phenomenon that is now in “crisis” levels, adversely affecting farmers and indigenous peoples, especially in developing countries such as the Philippines.

Indigenous peoples in the Philippines and all over the world, in fact, give the least contribution to the emissions of greenhouse gases. Many of the remaining intact ecosystems like forests and watersheds remaining in the country which in their little ways minimize effects of greenhouse gas emissions, are located in and managed by indigenous communities. This is due to their world view on their ancestral lands which also include fields, forests, rivers, mountains, flora and fauna, minerals underground, seas and air.

But damaged ancestral lands where different ecosystems are found are mainly caused by activities of large corporations and government agencies who implement large scale and profit-oriented projects such as mining, hydro-electric dams, mono-crop plantations, logging and eco-tourism.

The projects done in indigenous peoples' communities increase the risks whenever climate change-related events like strong typhoons take place. In communities where there are large projects, the
indigenous peoples feel that they are in a perpetual state of disaster and may encounter huge damages to lives and properties once natural disasters come. This also happened during the Typhoon Pepeng (TC Parma) that caused massive landslides especially in mining communities in the Cordillera.

Indigenous peoples, given their self-determination and full use of their indigenous knowledge and socio-political institutions can abate the risks of natural hazards such as typhoons. Their rich indigenous knowledge in natural resource management and biodiversity conservation which is rooted in their close relationship with their ancestral lands and the environment helped maintain the ecological integrity of their communities for hundreds of years. But, their own efforts in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction are often times looked down upon or dismissed as backward, and lacking in scientific and technical integrity or worse vilified that they got their knowledge from insurgent groups in the countryside.

The indigenous peoples of Panay and Palawan are facing issues affecting their ancestral lands and environment even before Yolanda struck. Part of the ancestral domain of the Tumanduk of Panay Island is where a military reservation in declared and they are banned from doing economic activities such as farming there but were leased to oil palm, biofuel and rubber tree plantations. They also fear for their land and lives with the looming construction of the mammoth Jalaur Dam, a flagship project of the Aquino presidency. The Tagbanua and Cuyonin of Coron Palwan, on the other hand, are hosts to thousands of tourists and tourism establishments. These activities in indigenous communities increase their risks to disasters and there’s no guarantee that they will be able to minimize these when even their indigenous knowledge and practices in preventing disasters, climate change adaptation and minimizing risks are severely affected by projects even before the event of a natural hazard.

The meager response to indigenous communities who were victimized by TC Haiyan shows the government’s historical neglect of indigenous peoples putting them in big risks. The failure of the government to provide the appropriate infrastructure and basic services to indigenous communities increases the indigenous peoples’ vulnerabilities to natural disasters such as TC Haiyan. Often times, these needed services are provided by non-government organizations or private corporations as part of their corporate social responsibility and promises in exchange for the indigenous peoples’ consent to their big projects.

The Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples’ Rights appreciates the support for relief and rehabilitation provided by international agencies and foundations. More so, we salute our partner NGO’s like the Peoples’ Development Institute, Integrated Development program for Indigenous Peoples in Southern Tagalog (IDPID-ST), the Iglesia Filipina Independiente Visayas- Visayas Mindanao Office for Regional Development (IFI VIMROD) and other service-oriented NGOs who readily helped in the relief and rehabilitation efforts for poor farmers and indigenous peoples in TC Haiyan-affected areas.

We also hope that the “Build Back Better” rehabilitation program of the government will mean rebuilding of self-reliant, empowered and food-secure communities. The extent of the damages brought about by TC Haiyan is basically due to the people’s poverty and the flawed political patronage system in the local and national levels of government. This rehabilitation plan must include indigenous
communities and must be granted not for patronage but based on the self-determination of indigenous peoples.

For indigenous peoples, the way forward is the genuine recognition of their rights to ancestral land and self-determination. They must practice and enrich their indigenous knowledge systems in natural resource management and taking care of the environment in order for them to survive calamities such as TC Haiyan. These must be maximized and given due recognition by the government and the wider Philippine society.

Finally, we salute the survivors of this huge disaster that struck the country especially the small farmers and indigenous peoples who stood firm and are continuing their struggles for their land, livelihood, and genuine development of their communities. #