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## UNITY STATEMENT

### *Tourism in the Philippines: A View from the Underside*

*(A joint initiative of Peace for Life and ECOT, with the cooperation of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, CONTAK Philippines and IBON Foundation)*

**October 21-22, 2008**

**Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines**

We are individuals and representatives of the church and of NGOs from labor, environment, culture and arts, rural development, health, indigenous peoples, women, and children's rights in the Philippines participating in the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism Consultation entitled *Tourism in the Philippines: A View from the Underside* on October 21-22, 2008.

Amid the global financial crisis and the domestic economy's stagnation, there is widespread poverty, a rise in joblessness, deterioration of the health and education systems, further displacement of people due to human-made disasters and vulnerability to natural calamities, increasing homelessness, and other social problems.

The dire economic and social conditions of the people today are attributed, among other reasons, to decades of development aggression, a part of which is so-called "tourism development." Government strategies on tourism since the introduction of neoliberal policies have intensified the commercialization of culture, history, and heritage sites, prostitution and human trafficking, child exploitation, the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and land dispossession and livelihood displacement, especially of the upland farmers, fishers, indigenous peoples and other national minorities.

The government has played a pivotal role in exploitative and oppressive forms of tourism. Adhering to the policies of globalization being peddled by the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the government is pushing tourism as an engine of economic growth, employment, and the promotion of indigenous culture and history; however, they are actually advancing the interests of Trans-

National Corporations (TNCs) in airline and shipping industries, hotel and restaurant industries, real-estate development, and travel agencies.

We oppose current tourism practices and the government's policy direction that

- ❖ offer the country's lands, including cultural and heritage grounds, and other natural resources, for exploitation by big business and TNCs in the guise of promoting economic growth as well as the country's history and culture;
- ❖ make national interests subservient to the profit interests of tourism-related industries such as airlines and shipping, big hotels and restaurants, so-called medical tourism hospitals, resorts, escort services, and other commercial tourist destinations;
- ❖ prioritize medical tourism thereby tapping the country's best hospitals and medical services/facilities with a tour package for foreign visitors and making health and medical care even more inaccessible to millions of Filipinos, underscoring the government's abandonment of its responsibility to provide basic health services to the people;
- ❖ place culture in the service of tourism which is inimical to the development of national identity and genuine nationalism;
- ❖ promote "so-called" traditional and indigenous culture and arts but in the process alienate Indigenous peoples from their traditional way of life and their capacity to develop as a people;
- ❖ develop tourist sites and leisure facilities without regard to and at the expense of the local population and the environment;
- ❖ lure tourists through images of women and the prospect of inexpensive sexual services due to underdevelopment; and
- ❖ make children more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

It is for these reasons that we declare our opposition to the Arroyo government's tourism development program, specifically the proposed Tourism Act of 2008 making it a national policy to "foster robust tourism growth" and other legislations in consonance with the General Agreement on Trade in Services and Trade-Related Investment Measures which liberalize the service industries and give unrestricted entry to tourism-related TNCs.

We must reject the pending Tourism Act of 2008 which is integral to the neoliberal agenda that expands the powers of TNCs to exploit the people, the culture and the natural resources of the country. The Act will only worsen and intensify the ill effects experienced with the current tourism policies.

We believe that tourism can be a good instrument of understanding and solidarity among cultures and people—if we link the population to an ethos of protecting the environment, if we relate the people’s history of struggle with their present situation, if we affirm the people’s cultural and social life, and if we pursue the people’s aspirations for justice, human rights, democracy and sovereignty.

Within this context, we challenge the tourism industry by developing forms of ethical and socially responsible travel and recreation which foster understanding and respect for other cultures and beliefs.

We shall promote and practice ‘solidarity tourism’ that

- ❖ challenges the profit orientation and commercial basis of mass tourism;
- ❖ offers opportunity to understand the Philippine context beyond its prevailing commercial image;
- ❖ serves as a window to the struggle of people for peace and fullness of life for all;
- ❖ offers an opportunity for mutual sharing, learning and participation; and
- ❖ that enables the formation of networks of people and organizations committed to work for justice and peace.

We commit to a continued cooperation and networking with the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism in the pursuit of ethical and socially-responsible travel and recreation.

We challenge the Church, as a shepherd of the people of God, to stand and take action against unethical strategies of national development, as easily identified in the Arroyo government’s tourism policy that degrades human dignity and does violence to human communities. Voices of the faithful must denounce and oppose tourism as an instrument of oppression and exploitation.

We call on the wider people’s movement for justice and peace to lead the opposition to the pending Tourism Act of 2008 and advance the pursuit of genuine development for the Filipino people.