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**PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT'S COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS AMIDST THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC PRESENTED TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

National Security Adviser Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., speaking in the United Nations Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, reiterated the country's commitment to the fight against global terrorism.

"Terrorism knows no borders, so international cooperation is essential. We will continue to work with bilateral partners, as well as with ASEAN and the UN, for only through joint efforts can we effectively address the scourge of terrorism."

Secretary Esperon's declaration concluded his statement delivered during the Interactive Closing Discussion of Member States' Counter-Terrorism Priorities in the Post-COVID 19 Environment. Terrorist groups, such as the Abu Sayyaf, continue to conduct attacks and online recruitment has increased despite the pandemic. Moreover, an emerging focus area due to the changing landscape brought by the COVID-19 pandemic is the threat of bioterrorism and countering the terrorist narrative, especially on social media.

The National Security Adviser presented to the plenary that the Philippines has upgraded its legal framework through the Anti-Terrorism Act, which updates the 2007 Human Security Act. This legal instrument was drafted with the recommendations of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

The enactment of this law was brought about by lessons learned from the Marawi siege, wherein the participation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) were noted. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 now allows the Philippine government to prosecute FTFs by criminalizing recruitment to and membership in a terrorist organization, and providing material support to terrorist and FTFs. These legal mechanisms, which were previously not possible through the HSA, are now present in the ATA. Further, the enactment of this legislation is in fulfillment of the country's commitments under the United Nations Global Strategy on Counter-Terrorism, and relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

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resolutions. In particular, this includes the country's obligations to international law through UNSC Resolution 1624.

Secretary Esperon himself was pleased to report that despite the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic that has crippled the entire world, the Philippines has recognized the need to be watchful against terrorists that may take advantage of this health crisis. He further underscored that the pandemic has brought to the fore that public health and security systems are interdependent on each other. Accordingly, this reaffirms the goals of the Philippine National Security Strategy, which is anchored on the protection and safety of the Filipino people from any threat. As public health is a national security issue, the government continues to maximize its resources for the COVID-19 pandemic as it equally does so in the global fight against terrorism.

In closing his statement, the Secretary thanked the audience of policymakers, diplomats, and high level officials of the United Nations for their support for the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and for their provision of capacity-building programs to strengthen the country's response to terrorism.

To recall, delegates from the UNOCT and CTED were in Manila in March 2020 to discuss counter-terrorism priorities which the UN can support, to include the FTF phenomenon, border management, countering terrorist travel, and terrorist financing.

The Second United Nations Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week was held online from July 6-10, 2020. The event brought together high-level officials from the United Nations System, experts, and civil society leaders from Member States of the UN to exchange views and discussions on priorities which included bio and cyber terrorism, addressing the plight of victims of terrorism, flagship UN counter-terrorism programmes, human rights and counter-terrorism, countering terrorist financing, youth-led initiatives to build resilient societies, and civil society and media perspectives to prevent violent extremism. This year, the conversation focused on the reshaping of the global landscape due to COVID-19, and its possible effects on global counter-terrorism efforts.



HERMOGENES C. ESPERON, JR.