

“The Suffering and Anguish of My People”

A talk on

Filipinos in the Nuclear Age

by Sister Christine Tan, member of the Ecumenical Council on Justice and Peace in the Philippines. This speech was given June 7, 1982 before the International Action Conference, Cooper Union, New York City, in support of the Second Special Session of the UN on Disarmament. At the conclusion of her talk Sister Tan received a standing ovation from the several hundred international delegates there assembled.

The thoughts I share here today with you do not come from me alone, but from the suffering and anguish of most of my people in the Philippines.

I live in Manila, in a slum area of approximately three thousand families. Here, almost no one enjoys more than one full meal a day. We do not know what it is to turn on a faucet and feel water run. Our air is not only polluted and foul smelling, but totally inadequate for the choking pores of our lungs. We have no drainage, no sewer system. During the dry season, we roast, during the rainy, we float.

Our fruits, if we ever see them, get smaller and more wrinkled. We hear that the best are exported to HongKong and Japan. Years before, we could share six skinny dried fish for our family of eight. Now, we can share only two.

Why is it that we Filipinos are water-less, landless, home-less, hungry, ailing, over-worked and underpaid? Are the fruits of our land only for the foreigner and a few Filipinos to enjoy and squander? Why are we treated like sick dogs in our own country? Why does our dictatorship promote such socio-economic-political inequality?

Developed countries have invented nuclear power. Their economy can absorb this capital intensive technology. But with us, the scenario is different. Should our dwindling resources not be utilized instead to give us Filipinos water, food, proper burial, in other words, to give us life? How can we allow such a super exorbitant amount of funds, borrowed at high interest from the World Bank to be used for the production of nuclear power and nuclear armory?*

Our political life is another tale. We do not possess the basic human rights to speak freely, to assemble, organize, or even express our fears, or protest against injustice. We may not even hold a picket in front of the American Embassy, for immediately, military men with truncheons and arms appear to protect Americans from us Filipinos. Our media is not only gagged, but one that deliberately and maliciously brainwashes our minds and numbs our wills. Any act or idea against the local powers and their foreign masters is considered subversive, and this could mean arbitrary arrest, indefinite detention, torture, and death.

We therefore continually ask, why do we experience such grave oppression? What is the reason behind all this repression? Why do we have no participation in decisions that shake our economy and submerge our culture? Why, for example, was it so easy for Westinghouse to ink the nuclear plant contract without so much as a whimper of public opinion? Are we purposely being kept ignorant so that we remain passive to these devastating issues? Why are political regimes supportive of nuclear arms? Are they in turn supported by the trans-national companies that produce these arms?

The dangers of a nuclear war fill us with terror. If such a catastrophe befalls us, none will be able to write about it. But what to me is far more grave, is the price humankind is forced to contribute towards the full-scale production of nuclear arms, armory, and arsenals. *At what price?*

The riches of our earth are extracted and utilized, not that mankind may become more human, but that mankind may be annihilated. Our tottering economy, buried in external debt, is being still further buried so much so that even our unborn great grand children, are already victims of others' greed. Our personal dignity, national freedom, basic

*Westinghouse has a contract with the Marcos government to construct a \$2 billion nuclear reactor at Bataan.

**In 1979 Marcos signed an agreement allowing "unhampered United States military operations" on U.S. bases in the Philippines. This has been understood to mean the right to store nuclear weapons on these bases.

human rights, Asian aspirations, are deliberately and systematically suppressed so that no voice and no groups of voices can thwart the political interests and ambitions of the elite in power. As for our dreams for our country and our children, with foreign powers controlling our economy and dictating our political life, do we Filipinos have any chance to fashion our own future?

In our history, the Church has been accused of keeping silence in the face of massive wrong doing. During the time of Adolf Hitler and the massacre of more than six million Jews, the Church kept silent. When martial law was declared in the Philippines, in Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, the Church did not raise her voice to expose the immorality of such political prostitution. While thousands of my countrymen are tortured into mangled heaps of breathing flesh, in the guise of national security, I still wait to hear some high prelate, maybe the Pope, denounce Marcos for these brutal atrocities.

Today, however, as Church persons, we rise. With all our strength, together, and with one loud voice, we protest against the production of nuclear arms, the storage of nuclear arms, and the presence of foreign bases in our countries. We not only protest but we condemn all these. We not only condemn but we point to the powers that produce nuclear arms as the *forces of evil* whom every human being on this earth must expose, oppose, and eventually, destroy. Thank you.



A Manila slum child

Photo by J. Clancey