Executive Secretary Paquito “Jojo” Ochoa, Jr., Mayor Alfredo Lim, fellow justice officials (to be named as necessary), PLP Officers led by its President Jonathan Lledo, prosecutors, colleagues in the service, good morning!

The energy is unusually high on this opening session of the 24th National Convention of the Prosecutor's League of the Philippines – the home team of the Department of Justice. Perhaps this is due to the two-day pre-convention activities of sports and friendly competition. Perhaps it is the joy of camaraderie and fellowship of friends here and there some of whom we only get to see on special occasions. Perhaps it is this year's timely theme “Meeting the Challenges of Global Crime”.

At a juncture of modern society when we, whether in the public or private sector, come face to face with emerging international crime trends that are by their nature organized, cross-border, involving huge amounts of money and affecting a big number of the population, there is a need to open our minds to new realities, to be prepared to learn
new skills and acquire new tools, and most importantly to meet the challenges that evolve through the years. Consider the range of global crimes – from money laundering to drug trafficking, from human trafficking to cyber criminality, from smuggling to scams and frauds, to terrorism and piracy and even environmental crimes. The list grows longer still even as we continue to hold the fort on the regular crimes on the domestic front.

As the major enforcement institution, we must be forever vigilant.

Vigilance requires a proactive stance. For far too long we have blindly followed our existing archaic procedure that sets up an artificial firewall between policemen and prosecutors. This had lead to fragmentation, the clear lack of coordination and gaps in the appreciation of the quantum of evidence and the observance of substantive and procedural due process. Consultations and researches confirm that a law enforcement that fuses the police and prosecutor functions yield the best results. It is time we rethink our primary role as prosecutors and this is to investigate crimes that are by their nature undetected and unchallenged. Your kit contains a manuscript on “A Short History of Preliminary Investigation” which may provide the direction we are taking.

Moreover, having investigating teams led by prosecutors will take out a whole layer of mini-trials that we are now undergoing when the hands of the prosecutors are tied and cannot guide or direct the investigation when it is obvious that certain pieces of evidence or specific legal provisions can be tapped or complied. This will add speed and accuracy to our criminal justice system. Within the year, we intend to circulate a draft legislation on a seamless and coordinate approach to criminal investigation. For those who are interested, please submit your thinking papers.

Vigilance further requires that we outsmart our opponents, chiefly organized crime. In a society where the rule of law is weak and
state power is not equipped to stamping out criminality, graft and corruption a key factor for bad governance takes on a more pernicious dimension. During last year's address in General Santos, we outlined the link between good governance, the rule of law, and the role of prosecutors in the fight for justice. This continues to be the bedrock principle.

Going to specifics, I am aware that specialized training programs are underway. Our global cybercrime seminar is underway. May I please see a show of hands among you who have benefited from the competencies shared? National Capital Region, Region 11, Region 7, Region 2. Next month will be in Region 1, then Region 5 in May. We have also developed a curriculum on financial investigations which we expect to be run beginning second semester of this year. Watch out for more cutting edge programs in the coming years.

Our Leadership-Management Conference of prosecutors as heads of offices is now on year 2. I encourage everyone to begin developing new dimensions of your work phases to be ready for the future tasks ahead. May I just say that there is a special reason why one of you, a fellow prosecutor, was designated as the Officer-in-Charge of the country's premiere investigating agency, our very own National Bureau of Investigation. Prosecutor Rojas is the number one performing regional prosecutor in the land and has a track record of clearing cases. He is also a very simple man. Prosecutors all are destined for greater tasks, greater challenges!

In the meantime, trenches need to be dug, supplies need to be procured, reforms need to be implemented to ensure that frontline services are uncompromised. Last year and after six years of waiting, the NPS was finally exempted from the DBM's rationalization plan. Issuance on the first round of hiring for this quarter has already been made. Succeeding issuances are being prepared. The end goal is to have each prosecution office staffed adequately and not reliant on local government units.
We have signed the DOJ-GSIS Memorandum of Agreement to expedite transactions for prosecutors and to ensure that access to credit facilities and other services is uninterrupted. The GSIS has already begun the process of adjusting your accounts. Opportunities and avenues for trainings and seminars continue to be open based on distribution, relevance and of course, merit.

Again on the substantive front, the rule on automatic review of drug cases has been issued. This will balance the need to check on the resolution of the investigation prosecutor and the right to liberty.

I have personally started a regular meeting with all heads of offices and their teams to implement our zero backlog policy. The DOJ should be the first practitioner of delivering efficient and effective justice.

Our Internal Affairs Units are now constituted and prepared to tackle the sensitive and admittedly difficult task of investigating our own ranks of prosecutors for possible lawbreaking and official misconduct – a task which we vow to accomplish without relish but with utmost conviction and determination.

Already, major cases of the DOJ are now posted online as part of our call for greater transparency and at the same time respecting the right to privacy as necessary. Our financial statements will soon be uploaded on the website as well.

Our last big project which brought the Department's work to focus is the groundbreaking 1st National Criminal Justice Summit was held last December. The results are for publication and all of you will be made privy to the findings and recommendations including the institutional, turn-key issues that require systemic and strategic approaches.

All these actions, long neglected and never been acted upon, will take time. But with your full support and working together, we can
and we will achieve our single battlecry of “Justice for All”.

The President, from the first day of office, stressed good governance in running the affairs of the state. As his alter ego, I can do no less. As prosecutors of the Department of Justice, we can do no less.

In this light and before I close my message to you, our valued prosecutors in the DOJ National Prosecution Service, I invite you to join me in a short mental exercise.

Every single day of the year, you work day in and day, conducting preliminary investigations and prosecuting cases in court; some of you doing the same things for the last several years, perhaps even decades. What that kind of routine can do is result in the sacrifice of a well-rounded perspective. How many times, in the last year, have any of you thought of what it’s like to be outside looking in? How often have you considered what image you project to the public as an individual prosecutor, and the National Prosecution Service as a collective?

In the first place, you may ask, is it even important? To this I will answer a most emphatic: “Yes, most definitely.” Why? Because if we project the kind of image that we ought to – one that shamelessly and boldly presents a credible threat to anyone who dares to violate our penal laws and disturb the peace and order – perhaps we could more effectively help the rest of the law enforcement and criminal justice community to curb the rise of criminality. Perhaps we could help minimize incidents like those we hear in the news where heinous crimes are being committed in broad day light, or in crowded streets, almost insolently and contumaciously by lawless elements; we would not be targeted as a lucrative destination or transit point for global crimes; and, perhaps, our foes would not have the temerity to exploit and abuse court processes and legal remedies to thwart our efforts to prosecute crimes. In the last year alone, I have seen accused individuals apply for temporary restraining orders to prevent us from prosecuting them in court; I have seen a former director of the
National Bureau of Investigation apply for a Writ of Amparo to protect *himself* from officials in the DOJ; and I have seen a former President question the authority of the DOJ to issue watch list orders and hold departure orders, in accordance with a department circular that was issued *during her term* and by *her own, hand-picked Justice Secretary*, and after literally several thousands of WLOs and HDOs were issued during her nearly decade-long term without even a squeak of a dissent from her.

Therefore, I cannot help but ask myself, what is going on here? How dim-witted do they think we are? When they look at us, the prosecutors, the NPS, the DOJ and the other attached agencies, what do they see if not formidable competence and strength of character? Do they see incompetent push-overs and price tags? When what we should be projecting is the righteous wrath of advocates fighting for justice?

Half the problem, of course, you may point out is the existence of less-than-respectable elements in the judiciary, who issue blatantly unfair and illegal orders without even blinking an eye. But the point is we cannot take what they dish out lying down. We have to project the image of unwavering determination by pursuing all avenues to protect and uphold our mandate by resorting to all legal remedies available to us. Do not hesitate to question their acts and hold them accountable.

I tell you, half the battle is won if we could help prevent crimes from being committed by projecting a warrior-like image of competence, integrity and endless resolve. I would be the first to acknowledge that we are on our way towards that goal. The recent filing of criminal charges and issuance of warrants of arrest against influential and high-ranking government officials, both former and incumbent, can stand as the foundation for this image. Already we are being lauded for our courage and political will, but we have to see these cases through and ensure their conviction and make sure to tell the public, especially criminal elements, that there’s more where those came from.
As you go through the rest of the convention, be assured that you have my personal support and wellwishes specially to those who aspire to serve as officers of the PLP. I only request that the PLP leadership help us in building a strong and positive image for the National Prosecution Service as a force to reckon with.

I wish you all the best.

Thank you for a great year 2 with you and for the honor and privilege of serving as your Secretary. Mabuhay!