Ladies and gentlemen of the press, good morning. Thank you for joining us at this press conference.

Before I make an opening statement, let me introduce the members of the Philippine Negotiating Panel and who are also with us this morning: Ambassador Lourdes Yparaguire, Ambassador J. Eduardo Malaya, Department of Justice Undersecretary Francisco Baraan III, and DND Assistant Secretary for Strategic Assessment Raymund Jose Quilop.

The Philippine and United States Panels are in the midst of active negotiations, and within that constraint, the Philippine Panel members thought that we need to apprise the Filipino people of the state of play and direction of the negotiations, in the interest of transparency.

I wish to inform you that the Philippine and United States Panels recently concluded the 6th Round of Negotiations on an agreement that would strengthen defense cooperation between our two countries.

This proposed agreement will allow the sharing of defined areas within certain AFP facilities with elements of the US military – on a rotational basis – within parameters consistent with the Philippine Constitution and laws.

Discussions in the 6th Round were substantive and productive, and significant progress was made. It has shown the shared commitment of both parties to enhance cooperation in defense, security and related fields, including humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

Before the start of the 5th Round last January, the Philippine Panel presented to the US side a draft full text which, in our view, more comprehensively articulated the Philippines’ positions, notably its consistency with the Philippine Constitution and relevant laws, as well as mindfulness of the country’s historical experiences. The Panel was also guided by the principles of full respect for Philippine sovereignty, non-permanence of US troops and no US basing in the Philippines, mutuality of benefits and respect for the Philippine Constitution, including the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

This Philippine draft was accepted by the United States during the 6th Round, and made as both panel’s working draft. The ensuing exchanges of views have helped pave the way for the formulation of mutually agreeable language, and consensus were arrived at on many provisions of the draft agreement, including on the proposed accord’s preamble, purpose and scope, definition of terms, ownership of constructed infrastructure, coordination on security, contracting procedures and resolution of disputes.

The United States Panel has also agreed to the inclusion of provisions on environment and safety, and opportunities for potential Philippine suppliers of goods, products and services.

The next round of talks, where we will work on remaining issues, will be held in late March.

I am aware that you have a trip to Baguio this morning, and we, the members of the Philippine Panel, also have scheduled inter-agency consultations just after this press conference. As we like to have a more extensive question-and-answer session, we have constraints with respect to time. With these preliminary words, we are now ready for your questions.

Thank you very much.