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MRS. MARCOS TESTIFIES SHE WARNED AQUINO NOT TO RETURN TO MANILA

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Imelda R. Marcos said today that three months before his assassination, Benigno S. Aquino Jr. had sought her permission to return home from exile, and that she had warned him against it.

Mrs. Marcos, testifying before a civilian panel that is looking into the August 1983 slaying of the Filipino opposition leader, said she had pleaded with Mr. Aquino to postpone his return to some future time.

"I told him it was not wise to ride two bancas," Mrs. Marcos said, using the Philippine term for canoes. "I said, 'it will be dangerous.' "

She said she added: " 'If something happens to you, the Government will be at a disadvantage, there will be a stigma. We will be called a nation of barbarians.' " Met Aquino in New York

Mrs. Marcos said the meeting with Mr. Aquino occurred May 21, 1983, at the Philippine Center on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

On Aug. 21, Mr. Aquino arrived at the Manila airport from the United States and was escorted off the airliner by Philippine military men. Moments later, he was shot to death.

The Government has identified the killer as Rolando Galman, who was described as a hired gunman who evaded security at the airport. He was killed on the spot by soldiers. Relatives of Mr. Galman testified that the military used him as a fall guy for their plot against Mr. Aquino.

Mrs. Marcos said her efforts to dissuade the opposition leader from returning were motivated by her desire to save his life. She said she had intervened on his behalf once before, by interceding with her husband, Ferdinand E. Marcos, to allow Mr. Aquino to leave prison in the Philippines to go to the United States for a heart bypass operation in 1980.

As evidence of her humanitarian concern, she presented before the commission Mr. Aquino's letter of thanks and a gold chain with a cross that she said he had taken off his neck and given to her in gratitude. Public Barred From Session

Members of the investigative commission kept the public and all but a few reporters from the hearing on the ground that they wished to avoid overcrowding.

Mrs. Marcos said that when they met last in May 1983, Mr. Aquino informed her of his desire to return to the Philippines and he pleaded with her for assistance in getting his Philippine passport renewed.

"He told me his Harvard grant was about to expire and his heart bypass was clogging up," Mrs. Marcos said. "He said, 'My days are numbered. My time is up. I want to go home.' "

Mrs. Marcos said that when she called President Marcos in Manila, even before she could tell him what Mr. Aquino's request was, he turned it down.

Mrs. Marcos said the opposition leader promised her he would not return without first informing her or her brother, Benjamin T. Romualdez, the Philippine Ambassador to Washington. Mrs. Marcos said that it was with shock she learned from Salvador Laurel, leader of the opposition coalition in the Philippines, that Mr. Aquino would return Aug. 21.

She said she replied to Mr. Laurel, "if he comes home, he is dead, and we will all be in trouble, including you."

She explained to the commission that her warning was based on threats to Mr. Aquino that the Government knew about from their intelligence sources.