

## Planned transfer a miracle, says Filipina on death row - The Star

A Filipina drug convict on death row in Indonesia said from prison that her planned transfer was a “miracle”, in her first interview since Manila and Jakarta signed an agreement last week to repatriate her.

Mother of two Mary Jane Veloso, 39, was arrested and sentenced to death in 2010 after the suitcase she was carrying was found to be lined with 2.6kg of heroin, in a case that sparked uproar in the Philippines.

Both she and her supporters claim she was duped by an international drug syndicate and in 2015, she narrowly escaped execution after her suspected recruiter was arrested.

“This is a miracle because honestly, even now, it still feels like a dream. Every morning when I wake up, I think about my aspirations, aspirations that I never had any certainty about,” she said when asked about the decision yesterday.

“That’s why I always prayed to God, ‘Lord, I only ask for one chance to go home and be with my family’. And God answered that prayer.”

Last week, Indonesia’s senior law and human rights minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra said a “practical arrangement” had been signed for her repatriation.

He said her release could take place “around Dec 20” before Christmas and that he had heard her death penalty would be reduced to life imprisonment.

Veloso’s case was condemned in the Philippines, with rallies of support and world boxing superstar Manny Pacquiao pleading for her life.

Her supporters said she was headed to work as a maid when she was arrested in Indonesia.

She now dreams of being reunited with her family after 14 years in prison in a case that has delivered her fame at home.

“Since I heard the news, my feelings ... were leaning more towards happiness. Because after almost 15 years, that is what I am waiting for ... I can go home to my country,” she said.

“I need to prepare mentally to face it all. Be it to face my family, to face everybody out there. And physically, I must be healthy too.”

An official in Indonesia’s coordinating law, human rights, immigration and corrections ministry said the government was “still preparing everything” for her transfer.

Indonesia is also in talks with Australia and France after President Prabowo Subianto had agreed to fulfil their requests to hand back some prisoners who were sentenced on drug charges.

High-profile detainees in discussion to be transferred include Frenchman Serge Atlaoui, a welder who was arrested in 2005 in a secret drugs factory outside Jakarta, with authorities accusing him of being a “chemist” at the site.

Jakarta is also in talks with Australia over the release of the five remaining members of Australia’s “Bali Nine” – Matthew Norman, Si Yi Chen, Michael Czugaj, Scott Rush and Martin Stephens – who are serving life sentences. — AFP

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