

Filipina inmate on Indonesia's death row calls repatriation move a 'miracle' - NST

INDONESIA: A Filipina inmate on death row in Indonesia told AFP from prison Friday 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 2.6 kilograms (5.7 pounds) 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.

"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 transfer could happen "around Dec 20" before Christmas and that he had heard her death penalty would be reduced to life imprisonment.

Veloso's case sparked outrage 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, and wants to advocate for other women if released.

"What I'm certain about is my first priority: focusing on my family," she said.

The prisoner said she had feelings of "happiness" since hearing news of the repatriation agreement.

"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, to face my family, to face everybody out there."

Veloso's family are due to arrive next week on central Java island where she is being held, with a Christmas farewell party organised for her, an Indonesian official told AFP.

Her mother Celia Veloso, 65, called for Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos to grant her clemency so she can spend Christmas with her family.

"We are excited to finally be with my daughter," she told AFP on Friday.

"Her two kids are pining to be with her too."

Veloso said she had learned how to play volleyball in prison, and showed off traditional Indonesian batik clothing she had made.

She said she will gift a butterfly painting to the prison, symbolising her transformation.

"I was once like a caterpillar – unwanted, looked down upon," she said.

"But through this painful process I've grown into who I am today, a butterfly, reborn and ready to face a colourful future."

An official in Indonesia's coordinating law, human rights, immigration and corrections ministry told AFP the government was "still preparing everything" for her transfer.

The agreement states the execution of Veloso's sentence upon return to the Philippines "will be governed by Philippine laws", with Manila given the authority to grant her clemency.

The Philippine presidential office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Discussions over the transfer of other high-profile detainees include Frenchman Serge Atlaoui, a welder arrested in 2005 at a secret drugs factory near Jakarta.

Jakarta is also in talks with Australia over the release of the five remaining members of Australia's "Bali Nine" who are serving life sentences.

Muslim-majority Indonesia has some of the world's toughest drug laws and has executed foreigners in the past.

At least 530 people were on death row in the Southeast Asian nation, mostly for drug-related crimes, according to data from rights group KontraS, citing official figures.

As of early November, 96 foreigners were on death row in Indonesia, all on drug charges, according to data from the Ministry of Immigration and Corrections.

Despite the ongoing negotiation for prisoner transfers, the Indonesian government gave the signal last week that it will resume the executions – on hiatus since 2016 – of drug convicts on death row.--AFP

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