

## FINAL PAPER

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“Ethnic Conflict, Peace and Development<sup>1</sup>:  
A Philippine Case Study”

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### Introduction

A Lebanese peace advocate<sup>2</sup>, said of war: “If a child grows up with the idea of violence, that you get what you can by force, what kind of world will this be?” My friends, it is the world that we in Muslim Mindanao are living in.

Today, allow me to speak on the situation in Muslim Mindanao. After the signing of the 1996 Peace Agreement, there was great hope that we were indeed on the road to the fulfillment of the promise that is Mindanao. Businesses and investments were in Mindanao. Even Muslim citizens were optimistic about the future. A relative from TawiTawi told me: “I can dream again.” Former President Fidel V. Ramos, who for many years led the military against insurgents, wisely advised “Break Not the Peace”.

We have not heeded the lessons of the past. We are breaking the peace. All-out-war strategies have become the primary method to secure the peace, especially post 9/11.

**War on Terror? The Terror of War.** To ensure national security in the short run, Muslim leaders concede that there is a need for assistance to professionalize and equip the military. However, the military is only one part of the solution. In the conflicted areas of Mindanao, existing national security programs, which rely heavily on military solutions, have negatively affected rule of law. People are radicalized due to marginality, poverty and absence of socio-economic development in their communities. Deep-seated grievances remain to be addressed: debilitating poverty, festering land issues and ancestral domain, lack of equitable representation, discrimination.

When discussing the problem of terrorism in the Philippines, it is necessary to disaggregate international terrorism from domestic insurgency. The major threat to dies in the Arab World is believed to be the Abu Sayyaf Group with its alleged ties to Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sofia. The Abu Sayyaf is responsible for the heinous crimes and has become more of a criminal enterprise with a veneer of ideology attached to it.

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<sup>1</sup>Paper presented by Amina Rasul, lead convenor of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy

<sup>2</sup>Julinda Abu Nasr, the director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

However, the question that has not been satisfactorily answered is how big a threat the ASG really poses due to its size and diminished capacities. The answer becomes even more complicated as some public officials and terrorism experts link MNLF and MILF troops with terrorism.

To make matters worse, corruption, narco-politics, kidnap for ransom and other criminal activities prevent many communities from enjoying the benefits of the simple life they hope to lead, mired as they are in poverty and hopelessness.

The picture in Mindanao is made even more complex by the interlocking sets of political and familial relationships, crosscutting linguistic and tribal differences, and other sets of allegiances to individuals and political agendas. "Rido" is a clear example.<sup>3</sup>

A simplistic view of the problem results in the application of a military solution to the conflict. The situation in Sulu today is a case in point. As media and some government officials continuously describe the insurgents in Sulu as part of the Misuari Breakaway Group, local leaders point out that the protagonists are MNLF, plain and simple. Given attempts to link the Jolo MNLF troops with the bombings in Makati, Davao and Gensan, many well-informed political analysts caution government to investigate the matter thoroughly. If the Jolo MNLF troops are not part of the terrorist attacks, military operations against them can lead to a breaking of the 1996 Peace Agreement.

#### **Rule of Law vs Reign of the Lawless.**

It is evident to our communities that law and order has broken down in Muslim Mindanao. Rule of law requires democratic pluralism, an economic system that promotes the development of every member of the society, and an independent judiciary. A well-functioning justice system including prison administration, police reform, and human rights protection are essential. It also requires the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Unfortunately, the administration of justice in conflict-affected Mindanao is weak. The police are under-trained, ill equipped and under-manned. Even if the police were strong, where would they bring evidence and who would enforce it? There is supposed to be a dual judicial system in the Muslim areas: *shariah*<sup>4</sup> for personal laws and the national justice system. Neither works very well in the areas of conflict, especially ARMM. In the case of *shariah*, although Philippine law provides for its implementation for Muslim communities, lack of funds seriously hamper the establishment of sharia courts in Mindanao. Moreover, many Muslim women leaders would like to participate in a review of the shariah code of personal laws to ensure gender fairness, within the tenets of our faith. As for the regional and local governments, there is consensus that these units are ineffective.

People have very poor expectations that the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) government can provide honest government, maintain peace and order, and provide for basic services. Thus, ARMM's administrative capacity, transparency and accountability in governance have to be improved. The forthcoming ARMM elections, not

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<sup>3</sup> Rido refers to armed conflict among clans

<sup>4</sup> Islamic laws

selections, can be the mechanism with which effective leaders will be installed. We can always hope.

ARMM supports the national government in the fight against terrorism. It was noted that political defense is one area that should not be left to the government alone, whether central and regional. There is a need to establish the basic conditions that will allow the communities themselves to participate in processes which will usher in and foster peace and development in Mindanao. Government is not the only stakeholder in the development process. Civil society, people's organizations, and others need to be involved.

A wise man said, "There never was a good war or a bad peace." While the Muslims of Mindanao stand behind President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in stopping terrorists, care should be taken not to implicate uninvolved groups in the process. Muslims are becoming convinced that there is a conspiracy which indiscriminately links even legitimate groups to terrorism in order to substantiate the threat.

### **Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Conflict.**

Although Philippine leaders acknowledge the immediacy of the fight against terrorism, there is general agreement that peace and stability cannot be attained without socio-economic development. The peoples of Mindanao are involved in a different kind of struggle, fighting unjust political structures which prevented the Muslim and ethnic communities from participating equally in the government's democratic processes.<sup>5</sup>

Since Islam is the unifying force among the Muslim tribes, it has been used by radicals to justify the rebellions and attract recruits. Henry David Thoreau said "What is human warfare but just this: an effort to make the laws of God and nature take sides with one party." It must be pointed out that it is not religion per se that is the major cause of conflict but the perceived injustices and oppression faced by minority groups. Thus, three key demands or rights have to be addressed by national government:

- Political rights: Full implementation of the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Philippine Government and the MNLF. The consensus among Muslim leaders is that full autonomy has not been attained. Moreover, stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process has been limited.
- Property rights: Rights to ancestral lands and access to natural resources by the Muslim tribes and indigenous peoples of Mindanao needs to be granted and ensured.
- Right to basic social services addressing basic human needs for health, water, education, food, and shelter, among others. ARMM is the poorest region with the least access to services and resources. Leaders bewail the worsening of the poverty situation after the signing of the 1996 Peace Agreement.

### **Areas of Assistance.**

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<sup>5</sup> February 14, 2002 teleconference on the Mindanao Situation, organized for the USIP by then Senior Fellow Amina Rasul.

Donor assistance in Mindanao has been primarily employed in three major areas. The first is basic services such as poverty alleviation programs, micro-enterprise and livelihood assistance programs, and primary health care. The second is education as Muslim communities suffer from the nation's lowest literacy rates. As part of the education package, assistance to improve the capacity of the madaris should be included. The third area is infrastructure from major road projects to potable water systems. .

There should be a fourth area, which relates to the implementation of rule of law. Although the Philippines is a republic, majority of the Muslims live under feudal systems. Under this fourth consideration, the capacity of stakeholders – especially women and youth – must similarly be strengthened. How about our ulama? The most recent Philippine survey on women and peace say in statistics what we have always known: the ulamas are a powerful voice in Muslim Mindanao, inspite of their lack of organization. They and the madrasahs can be a catalyst for positive change. The survey also confirms our contention that women can be effective in Muslim communities as peace advocates and mediators for conflict.

### **Conclusion.**

In conclusion, as we all strive to maintain a strong security presence in the region, we must stress that peace and progress of the region cannot rest on military victories alone. Economic growth and democratization of the region are keys to peace.

Agencies of government and the donor community need to strengthen the foundations for democracy as well as implement development and poverty alleviation programs more effectively. Without development and strong democratic institutions, the roots of terrorism will find fertile soil. Unless the deeply rooted grievances are addressed simultaneously, a military solution will only alienate the community.

All is not doom and gloom. The rays of hope come from the communities themselves. Civil society groups in Mindanao have, on their own, been active in organizing and implementing their own self-help projects. Interfaith groups have been effective in promoting peace advocacy and coexistence. The Bangsamoro civil society are moving to help their communities. Women's groups such as the Muslim Women Peace Advocates Council of Sulu, the Bangsamoro Women's Solidarity Forum, the Regional Commission of Bangsamoro Women are at the forefront of peace and development work, striving to be heard.

Listen to us and your plans will avoid pitfalls and cultural landmines. Support us and we will build a strong foundation for democracy. Partner with us and together we can make our dreams of peace and development a reality.