

War and peace in mindanao



War and Peace in Mindanao Murray Smith In December 2006 I had the chance to visit the island of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. Mindanao and the surrounding islands rarely make the headlines except when some Western tourists are kidnapped. But Mindanao has been the scene of an ongoing conflict that has now lasted for more than 35 years, as the Muslim Bangsa Moro people have fought for self-determination. To date the conflict has claimed 120, 000 lives, many of them civilians. More than a million people have been made homeless and destitute.

An estimated 200, 000 to 300, 000 refugees have taken refuge in neighbouring Sabah, Malaysia and many other have moved to Manila or other parts of the Philippines in search of security. Independence fighters in Mindanao The origins of the conflict go back a long way. The islands we now call the Philippines were colonized by Spain in the 16th century. But in fact the Spaniards just captured Manila and gradually extended their control over the northern island of Luzon. Over the next three hundred years they moved southwards, not without meeting considerable resistance: there were over 200 recorded uprisings during the Spanish colonial period.

But they never conquered Mindanao beyond a few coastal settlements. The western part of Mindanao and the neighbouring islands were ruled by the Muslim sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, the people being known as Moros. The rest of the island was inhabited by indigenous tribes. In 1896 the Philippines' war of independence from Spain began. But it was impacted by the Spanish-American War of 1898. Initially presenting themselves as friends of the Filipinos, the Americans ended up by ' buying" the Philippines from

Spain for 20 million dollars, by the terms of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898.

The resulting resistance by the Filipinos in Luzon was subdued at the cost of 600, 000 dead, about a sixth of the population. The conquest of the other islands led to a similar proportion of casualties. No accurate count has ever been made, but it is reasonable to say that at least a million (out of a population of seven million at the time) Filipinos died in the course of the American conquest. The American General “ Jake” Smith made no bones about what he wanted from his soldiers: “ I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you burn and kill the better it will please me”.

His colleague General Shafter expressed the same idea in a more philosophical vein: “ It will perhaps be necessary to kill half of the Filipinos in order to enable the other half to attain a level of existence superior to their present semi-barbarous state”. If the Spanish had no right to sell the Philippines and the Americans no right to buy them, they had even less right as far as Mindanao was concerned, since Spain had never conquered it. In the whole of the Philippines resistance to the American occupation lasted for years after the upper-class leaders of the movement had sold out and made their peace with Uncle Joe.

In Mindanao it lasted even longer, up until 1914. A high point of the American civilizing mission was reached in March 2 1906 with what is variously known as the First Battle of Bud Dajo or more accurately as the Moro Crater Massacre. Between 800 and 1000 Moros, armed with spears and swords, including many women and children, retreated into a volcanic crater

on the island of Jolo, where they were attacked with modern weapons and artillery. When the battle was over there were only six survivors among the Moros. About twenty Americans died, out of a force of several hundred.

By such methods were the Moros brought into the Philippine state - an American colony till 1946, then formally independent. They continued to be oppressed and discriminated against politically, economically and culturally. It is easy to understand that they fiercely maintained their own identity and their desire for freedom and it was only a question of time before this broke out in open rebellion. A defining moment was the Jabidah massacre in 1968, when Moro army recruits were massacred by their Philippine army superiors after refusing to take part in the invasion of Sabah, a province of Malaysia with which the Moros have historic links.

Armed struggle began in the early 1970s, first of all under the leadership of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which negotiated a peace agreement with the Philippine Government that led to the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1996, though it turned out to be a very unsatisfactory form of autonomy. A second movement arising from a split in the MNLF - the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) - continued an armed struggle and is now negotiating for wider autonomy. However, the situation in Mindanao is not simply a case of an oppressed nation, the

Bangsa Moro, fighting for self-determination, for autonomy within, or independence from, the Philippines. That is one aspect of it, but not the only one. The Moros never occupied the whole of Mindanao, there were always

non-Muslim tribes. Nevertheless there was a Muslim majority in Mindanao till 1918, but today the Muslim population of Mindanao is about 25 per cent. The indigenous Lumad peoples make up another 5 per cent. The remaining 70 per cent are Christian. This demographic evolution has nothing accidental about it.

It is the result of a policy conducted throughout the 20th century under American rule and by the independent Philippines, of settling Mindanao with migrants from elsewhere in the Philippines. This had a double advantage: defusing rural discontent elsewhere by offering land to these settlers, and populating Mindanao with people loyal to the Philippine state. This policy was consciously carried out by introducing land registration and Western legal norms and limiting the amount of land Muslims could own. The aim of successive government in Manila was therefore quite clear.

It was also successful. But these settlers and their descendants are not any kind of caste above the Moros, nor do they live separately from them. The migrants and their descendants are ordinary workers and peasants and they live side by side with Muslims. No one is proposing to drive them out.

Muslims are in a majority in some areas of Mindanao and the adjoining islands, which mostly form part of the ARMM, and a more or less substantial minority elsewhere. The twelve tribes of the Lumad indigenous peoples also have their ancestral lands in both Christian and Muslim dominated areas.

Any progressive solution to the problems of Mindanao must recognise the right of the Moro people to self-determination as well as the rights of the Lumad. But it also has to start from the fact that three peoples with their

own history, culture and identity now share Mindanao. That is why progressive forces on the island have developed, since the 1990s, the concept of a “ tri-people” solution, of the necessity and the possibility for the three peoples to live together. This is reinforced by the fact that the problems of Mindanao cannot be reduced to the Moro national question.

The regions of Mindanao and the neighbouring islands are among the poorest in the Philippines, which is saying something in a country where 40 per cent of the population live on less than two dollars a day. Often referred to as the Philippines’ “ last frontier” Mindanao is now the target of multinational companies eager to exploit its agricultural (rubber, coconuts, mangoes) and mining resources and its forests. Apart from plundering Mindanao’s natural wealth, these activities cause ecological havoc and infringe on the ancestral lands of the Lumad.

The social problems of Mindanao made it, in the 1970s and early 1980s, a bastion of the movement against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos – a movement which involved the armed insurgency of the New People’s Army led by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines, but also mass resistance by people’s organisations in the cities and countryside. The Maoist insurgency continued after the overthrow of Marcos in 1986, but it was greatly weakened in the late 1980s by political mistakes, a series of suicidal purges and finally a split in the CPP in 1992.

The hardline Maoists of the CPP-NPA, who advocate – and practise – physical liquidation of political opponents, are still present. So are forces from the other side of the 1992 split, the most important of which is the Revolutionary

Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPMM). Mindanao and the adjoining islands are bristling with arms. The army and the militarised police are omnipresent. Landlords and the multinational mining and logging companies all have armed goons at their disposal. The Moro movements are armed. Organising a strike, fighting for land reform or otherwise defending the poor and exploited can make you a candidate for the death squads.

Several hundred political activists have been murdered since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power in 2001, as have 50 journalists. So the movements of the left also have to be armed. The reason for my going to Mindanao was as part of a delegation from Holland to the 4th Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit. The main organiser of the event was the Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM). The MPPM arose as a response to the upsurge in hostilities on the island in 1997 and 1999 and in particular in response to the declaration of " Total War" against the MILF by then president Joseph Estrada in June 2000. A few months later Estrada was overthrown by a " people's power" movement). Previous summits had taken place in 2000, 2002 and 2004. While continuing to pursue its general work for peace and organising relief for victims of the war, the MPPM decided to focus on finding a lasting solution to the Bangsa Moro question, working in particular with the Bangsa Moro Consultative Peoples' Assembly headed by Professor Abhoud Syed M. Lingga. The twin axes of such a solution were the recognition of the Bangsa Moro people's right to self-determination and the proposal to have any settlement approved by a UN- supervised referendum. The campaign for such a referendum was launched at the 2nd summit in December 2002. The 4th summit was held in the town of Lamitan on the

island of Basilan. The choice was not accidental. Basilan and the neighbouring Sulu and Tawi-Tawi islands have been the centre of the activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Unlike the MNLF and the MILF, which are national liberation movements, the ASG is a fundamentalist Islamic group with links to Al Quaida that engages in terrorist actions – bombings, killings, kidnappings.

Its origins are obscure and government agents provocateurs are widely thought to have played a role in creating it. Today its activities are systematically inflated and used by the government to fan anti-Muslim feeling and insecurity, in order to justify the presence of Philippine troops and American “ advisers” in what Washington has defined as the latest front in its “ war against terror”. Lamitan was the scene of a siege and several deaths in 2001 when militants of the ASG held their foreign hostages in a local hospital.

Nevertheless the 55 per cent of Christians and 45 per cent of Muslims that make up the town’s population live harmoniously together. It was to counterpose this reality to the government and media inspired hysteria that Lamitan was chosen for the summit, and the participants received a warm and friendly welcome from the municipality and the people of the town. For five days, the more than 500 people at the summit, all but a handful of them from Mindanao and the surrounding islands, discussed how to work for a peaceful and democratic solution to the conflict in Mindanao.

Representatives of both the MNLF and the MILF, as well as of the Lumad peoples, took part. There were also organisations of youth, women and

popular organisations who are active on issues of peace, health, education and economic development. The main discussion in the summit centred on the question of self-determination and of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. But other issues were raised – Muslim women vigorously posed the issue of equality, to the obvious discomfort of some of the more traditionally-minded men. One session of the summit reported on the peace negotiations between the RPMM and the government.

A ceasefire had been signed in 2005 and agreement was reached on its application and monitoring in a meeting shortly after the summit. But unlike some armed groups, the RPMM does not see things from a purely military point of view. It makes a definitive agreement and disarmament conditional on the government fulfilling its promises to provide the resources to tackle the social problems in the areas where the RPMM operates – health, housing, employment, etc. Furthermore it lets the people in those areas define what their needs are.

The fight for peace in Mindanao is inseparable from the question of economic and social development. At present the level of armed conflict is quite low and the government is negotiating with both the MNLF and the MILF. It is possible, though far from certain, that a new agreement on autonomy for the Bangsa Moros will be reached. But peace is not just the absence of war. A lasting peace means not only respecting the rights of the Moros and the Lumad, it also means putting an end to all the forms of poverty, inequality and injustice which breed violence.

Mindanao is potentially a very rich island, but its natural wealth needs to be owned and controlled by its people and not as at present by an alliance of corrupt politicians, landowners and the multinationals. Murray Smith, formerly international organiser for the Scottish Socialist Party, is an active member of the LCR. Other recent articles: Philippines The Second Congress of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (Mindanao) – October 2010 Message to the RPM-M Second Party Congress – October 2010

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Subjects: •Conflict •conflicts Poverty and a lack of political will fuel

insurgency in the restive south of the Philippines About the author Mark

Dearn has written and researched for the Independent, Chunichi Shimbun

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with particular interest in separatist conflicts, minority rights issues and

Islamist groups.

The Filipina economist Solita Collas-Monsod delivered a grim warning last

month when she revealed that the number of people living in poverty in the

Philippines is growing, despite sustained economic growth and a rising GDP.

Growing economic inequality looks all the starker in the midst of the world's

second longest running internal conflict, the ongoing violence in the south of

the country. The seemingly intractable internecine war, centred on the

southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, stems from a variety

of historical grievances and modern injustices.

It is anchored in centuries old religious conflict and yet hampered by the government's total failure to improve the lives of those most likely to be driven into the embrace of insurgency. In the past fifty years, more than 100,000 people have lost their lives and more than two million have been displaced as separatist Muslim moros ("moors") of the southern Philippines waged a war of attrition - in their various organisational guises - against the post-colonial Philippines government. The roots of the conflict are deep.

Islam gained a foothold in the southern Philippines long before proselytising Spanish Jesuits arrived in the 16th century, yet where the Spanish failed to subdue the troublesome southern islands, American imperialists of the late 19th century succeeded, sowing the seeds of a conflict as destructive as those in Northern Ireland and the middle east, yet one that has seldom made it into the spotlight of international scrutiny. Also on Mindanao in

openDemocracy: Ron May "The quest for peace" 22 August 2007
Abhoud Syed M. Linga "Determining factors" 3 July 2007
The "next Afghanistan" It was during the turbulent years of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship when peaceful demands for independence snowballed into a fully fledged, bloody separatist war. The infamous summary execution of 28 Muslim military trainees in 1968 was the first catalyst, followed by the regime's declaration of martial law in 1972. The Tripoli Agreement, signed in 1976 between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the government, was meant to build a satisfactory peace, but splinter groups soon emerged, first the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), then in 1991 the Abu Sayyaf group, founded by a former Afghan-Soviet war mujahideen and officially condemned by both MNLF and MILF. Its bloody campaign began in the early 1990s, with

numerous attacks against Christian targets, including a cathedral in Davao in 1993. After the second “ people power” revolution in fifteen years ousted Joseph Estrada in 2001, Gloria Macagapal Arroyo became the latest dynastic “ trapos” (traditional politician) to head southeast Asia’s oligarchic system sans pareil.

Her government maintains a “ search and destroy” policy against Abu Sayyaf while officially seeking peace with MILF. It is backed by renewed US interest in the Philippines, historically an important piece for Washington on the Pacific’s geopolitical chessboard. Post 9/11, that interest has taken on whole new dimensions. In 2002, it was revealed that Khalid Shaikh Mohammed – the suspected mastermind of 9/11, with links to numerous other high profile attacks – had lived, and according to Philippine police, planned attacks in Manila.

Economic and military assistance focused on the southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu as the wider region became part of the second front in the “ war on terror”; links between the MNLF, MILF, Abu Sayyaf and the Indonesian-founded Jemaah Islamayiah and al-Qaeda were probed; the United States Institute of Peace was drafted in to facilitate the peace process; and, in 2005, the region was labelled the “ next Afghanistan” by a US embassy official in Manila.

The years since 2003 have been peppered by on-off fighting and stalling peace talks, in limbo at present with little hope of a meaningful resolution before Arroyo’s term expires in 2011. Chief among many sticking points is the contentious Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) on ancestral domain, a

treaty which would cede territory, governance, distinction as a separate community and international recognition to the Bangsamoro (Moro homeland), yet has been ruled unconstitutional by a 2008 supreme court ruling.

On top of that lie continual disagreements over the shifting composition of the “ peace panel”, allegations from the Philippine government of an overly sympathetic stance towards the Moros from international mediator Malaysia, continuing fighting between government and renegade MILF forces in central Mindanao, and the return to prominence of Abu Sayyaf with their capture of three Red Cross workers in January this year.

Material considerations Amidst the manifold problems that dog the peace process – from primordial claims of ethno-religious difference, to suppressed Moro identity and sovereignty, and continual wrangling over the MoA – one potent mixer, a recognized catalyst of conflict, is relatively sidelined: chronic poverty. In the 1950s, the Philippines was the most “ advanced” capitalist country in southeast Asia.

On its accession to the newly-formed ASEAN in 1967, its strong economy and industrial sector led many to see the country as a model for fellow members; by the 1980s, fifty percent of total income was in the hands of the top five percent. Gross inequality had grown engrained in the country, and little has changed since. More than thirty percent of Filipinos currently live below the poverty threshold at which they cannot afford food combined with the essentials for life, with international estimates suggesting 44 percent earn less than \$2 a day.

Notably, last year's Social Protection Index produced by the Asian Development Bank saw the Philippines lag behind many of its neighbours, the bank stating that it had done " little in the way of major pro-poor targeted programs". Mark Dearn has written and researched for the Independent, Chunichi Shimbun and the Tokyo Shimbun. He focuses on southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, with particular interest in separatist conflicts, minority rights issues and Islamist groups. Bottom of the pile

At the bottom of the poverty pile lies Mindanao, known as the country's " food basket", though wracked with hunger and want: it has been the poorest of the Philippines' three major island groups for almost a decade, with fifty per cent below the poverty line; all five regions of the island are in the ten poorest regions in the entire country; and within the island itself, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM – the area created by the MoA) ranks as one of the two poorest regions.

The Philippine Development Forum describes the rise in poverty in the ARMM between 1988 and 2006 as " alarming", going on to argue that " while income poverty alone does not automatically result in social unrest, international experiences have shown that an explosive political situation is created when poverty is combined with deprivation and injustice".

Visiting head of the Delegation of the European Commission to the Philippines, Alistair MacDonald, told the Philippines National Enquirer last year that poverty, above religion and secessionism, is the root of the conflict: " When you look at some of the human development indicators for parts of

Mindanao, things like health, nutrition, education, the Philippines should be ashamed to have such low levels of basic social indicators”.

No peace without development? Yet he, along with Arroyo, has taken the stance of “ no development without peace”: talking to the country in her 2008 State of the Nation Address, Arroyo laid blame for the failure to eradicate poverty in Mindanao on the conflict itself. MacDonald, while recommending the implementation of more government-led projects in Mindanao, argued that “ without peace, development can’t happen. None the less, with conflict and concomitant humanitarian disaster currently unfolding in central Mindanao, the US Agency for International Development’s nobley-named “ Growth with Equity in Mindanao” project has earmarked a \$190 million aid budget, administered by the World Bank, for the five years to 2012. The EU has coughed up 10. 5 million euros on Mindanao since October 2008 and 110 million euros in the past decade, while International Crisis Group reports that 40 aid projects focusing on conflict-affected communities are underway, backed by a wide array of funders, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and Japan.

The possibility of development in conflict zones may be doubted by some in power, but a government spokesman did acknowledge in 2007 that poverty in Mindanao provides fertile recruiting grounds. Little wonder then at the success of the MILF’s targeting of the unemployed with an instant payment of P20, 000 (about \$420) and the promise – whether kept or not – of further monthly remuneration. Nor the ability of Abu Sayyaf to continue to survive and recruit disillusioned young teenagers trapped in the cycle of poverty.

While a record GDP growth of more than 7 percent in 2007 should have raised hope for the prospect of lifting millions out of poverty, impoverishment has only increased. And last month's pronouncements by Monsod, an economist with intimate knowledge of the Philippines' economic prospects, offer little hope within the current financial climate of a record 41 per cent year-on-year drop in merchandise export earnings, increasing food prices and projected rises in unemployment for the next three years.

The Philippines government maintains that peace in Mindanao remains a priority for Arroyo, but others - from NGO workers to scholars - have expressed grave doubts, pointing to an ostensible lack of political will and Arroyo's own crumbling credibility after allegations of corruption and the outrageous "Hello Garci" electoral fraud scandal of 2005. If there really is a lack of political will, the portents are ominous. No development without peace, claims Arroyo, yet she lacks the political will to bring about peace, and thus no political will to alleviate the endemic, chronic poverty that besets Mindanao..

PoVERTY IN MINDANAO IS STATE-INITIATED Jump to Comments " Terrorism in Mindanao is State-initiated, therefore, it follows that poverty in Mindanao is also caused by the Arroyo government. " This was the statement of Gabriela Women's Party Representative Luzviminda Ilagan, following President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's claim during the State of the Nation Address that her administration's failure to alleviate poverty in Mindanao, is due to the endless conflict in the Philippines' second largest island. The State-declared ' war on terror' supposedly aimed to maintain peace in Mindanao turned out to be a ' war of terror' intended to protect the US and Arroyo's financial and <https://assignbuster.com/war-and-peace-in-mindanao/>

political interests. She deployed members of the military even in conflict-free areas to silence the people who oppose her so-called development projects,” the solon from Davao said. The massive military operations in the southern part of the Philippines effectively displaced thousands of families, who, for fear for their lives chose to leave their homes and their sources of livelihood behind.

Small farmers have complained that in eking a living, they are constantly starting all over again. Mindanao, the food basket of the Philippines, was reported to have six out of the ten poorest provinces in the country and has the highest incidence of hunger in the nation. The food crisis, which pegged the price of rice at an all-time high of P50 per kilo, increased the number of people who can not meet their daily food needs to 64% this year from 62% in 2007.

The rate of malnutrition among children also rose, especially in ARMM where it reached 35% from 31% in 1995, as children were forced to skip meals. The Cost of War in Mindanao by Linda B. Bolido (Manila, Philippines, August 2003) Early this year an eclectic group of Filipino women took to the front lines in the decades-long war that has divided Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. The island has been the battleground between government troops, communists, and secessionist groups wanting to establish their own Islamic state.

The women – representing various religious groups, ethnic backgrounds, and professions – did not take up arms for their cause. Instead they came together in a mass rally to publicly call for a halt to the violence. They also

launched a number of initiatives to promote support for peace and pressure the warring parties to engage in negotiations. “ Before, poverty was said to be the cause of the war in Mindanao,” said Baicon Macaraya, a law student who dropped out to volunteer in refugee centers. But now the war is causing the poverty in Mindanao. ” Whole communities have been forced to abandon their homes and move to crowded evacuation centers or set up temporary and flimsy shelters. Hundreds of families have been displaced in North Cotabato, Lanao del Sur, and Lanao del Norte, provinces with large Muslim populations. Children are growing up believing that violence is an inescapable reality of life, said Macaraya. And many women are watching their children succumb to disease and death.

Around the world wars are increasingly fought within the borders of a single country, and the fighting and destruction frequently targets civilians and noncombatants. Civilians accounted for more than 90 percent of the casualties caused by armed conflicts in the 1990s. Mindanao is no exception to this growing trend toward targeting noncombatants. “ Unarmed civilians are the casualties and they outnumber those of the armed combatants,” said former Miss Universe Margie Moran-Floirendo, one of the conveners of the peace campaign.

Many have become casualties not because they were attacked by soldiers, but because of the havoc wrought by the fighting. Together with the destruction of lives and livelihoods, war can also destroy croplands, forests, water and sanitation systems, and other key resources that support communities. As it is, Mindanao is already an island with serious environmental problems. Gold miners poison bodies of water by using

mercury to process ores. Deforestation causes serious flooding in many parts of the island during the monsoon rains.

And the loss of forest cover threatens to kill off many species, including the world's largest eagle, the endangered Philippine eagle. Environmental damages often reinforce the hardships endured by civilians caught in the crossfire of battle, according to World Resources 2002 – 2004, a new report issued by the World Resources Institute (WRI). The report concludes that democratic, transparent, and accountable governments tend to make better decisions for the environment. And war most frequently breaks out where good governance – and good decisions for the environment – is in short supply.

Joji Bian of the Mindanao Business Council, a mother of three, said the business sector has always been pro-peace. “ We have seen the effects of war. [It] has never been good for business because it creates an environment of insecurity and fear. ” In addition to the immediate threats and destruction caused by war, damage to social networks and natural resources often makes it difficult for communities to regain their footing once fighting has ceased. “ Amid war's brutality, death and deprivation, the environment may seem a minor casualty,” finds the WRI report. Yet the destruction of the environment, along with the demolition of democratic, informed decision-making, can prolong human suffering for decades, undermining the foundation for social progress and economic security. ” In Mindanao, women have responded to these threats by coming together to push for an end to the conflict. To carry on their work they have formed an advocacy group called Mothers for Peace. Their goal is to save more children

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from becoming victims of the war. And while they may not be aware of it, a peaceful resolution to the fighting in Mindanao would benefit the environment as well. (WRI Features, 660 words)