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Philippines

War and Peace in Mindanao

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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.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mprebels.jpg>]

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

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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.