

Philippines : The Battle of Marawi, the crisis in Mindanao and the role of solidarity

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The popular networks engaged in humanitarian activities in Mindanao are facing a brutal crisis provoked by a state of war localized in Marawi, restrictions and risks inherent in a martial law regime, particularly acute forms of religious intolerance in a multi-faith region. In such a situation, the role of solidarity takes on an « exceptional » dimension. This is true on the field, but also at the international level.

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The humanitarian actions done by popular and progressive networks respond to a certain number of general rules : aid is given according to means and needs without discrimination nor preconditions (breaking up with the practice of clientelism) ; it tries to respond on all levels - the physical (food, hygiene, housing...), psychological (traumatism), individual and collective ; it takes into account the state of extreme dependence of the victims by not allowing them to be manipulated and by protecting them from harassment (physical or moral), particularly frequent towards women and children ; it contributes to rebuilding social links and enable the victims to self-organize, take their destiny into their own hands, defend their rights.

All humanitarian catastrophes tear apart the social fabric. Reconstituting it is more or less difficult according to the cases. The devastation caused by the super typhoon Haiyan in 2013 covered a vast geographical zone and affected some ten million people. The victims could not seek refuge in their area nor in a neighboring district. They had to survive on the spot or emigrate to the city capital or to Mindanao. In addition, particularly in the marginalized communities where MiHands operates, there has been no experience of collective action on which to base upon the work of reconstruction. [1]

Concerning the crisis in Marawi, solidarity work faces three major difficulties :

The state of war and the situation of « displaced persons »

The state of war as such remains localized in Marawi (Lanao del Sur province) and the nearby areas. It did not extend to Iligan and the province of Lanao del Norte as was feared. But it has not been less

destructive.

The siege of Marawi began on 23rd May. Five weeks later, the government army still has not succeeded in taking control of the city, symbol of the history of the Moros (Muslim Filipinos). The number of « displaced persons » [2] caused by the violence of this crisis, exceeds some 350 000 today, where only 5% have been placed in government evacuation centers [3].

The others have either been taken in by their relatives or manage on their own as best they can. Their situation is very precarious. The conditions of returning to the homes are uncertain - the city has been widely destroyed by the fires and by bombings (artillery, aircraft).

No longer are there local actors capable of having their voices heard on site. The land is occupied either by the fundamentalists or the army. Institutional bodies and citizens movements have manifested their willingness to return to Marawi but no one knows yet when this will be possible and what the conditions will be. At the moment, the victims of the conflict cannot be helped and cannot be organized except in the places where they have found refuge.

A first point can be made : official aid to refugees is totally insufficient and often does not reach the most vulnerable communities. However, the popular solidarity networks, taking into account their implantation on the field, can bring aid to the victims, even if they are scattered. Because of their experience, they can also offer multiform help: material (food, daily needs), paramedical, psychological, « fun » (make the children play...) and help reconstitute the communities in order to fight against isolation (by organizing collective kitchens, etc.)

The martial law regime

Second observation : these aid networks also have an essential role of protection. It is particularly true when martial law was imposed, as is now the case in the whole island of Mindanao and not only in the province of Lanao del Sur. In practice, the juridical framework of the martial law regime actually does not matter much - on the ground, it means full powers to the army, at least this is what the ordinary people are made to believe, in a country where the culture of impunity has reached high levels (seven or eight thousand extrajudiciary executions have been committed in one year on behalf of the fight against drugs with the blessings of the President or the Justice Secretary!).

Not only should solidarity networks explain to the people that their rights remain even during martial law (in principle, it is much more limited legally in the Philippines than in France), but they also have to protect the persons who act as witnesses of human rights violations by the security forces. A dangerous task.

The army has multiplied checkpoints, the control posts, along the roads ; it can conduct raids from house to house. It has also constituted its own militia in Lanao del Sur, the Civil Defense Forces (CDF)[4]. A military device heavily marked by the arbitrary.

Salafist hyper-violence

The birth of currents using the name of the Islamic state is recent. They are not an artificial creation of the CIA, as the Communist Party (Maoist) leads us to believe, even if they are manipulated or infiltrated by the secret service of the United States. Neither are they a « projection » of the Isis in search of a new ground of action, even if « foreign combatants » participated in the siege of Marawi.

They are embedded in the social « fabric » of the Philippines (the role of big political clans...) and, particularly, in the conflicts between Moro clans : the rido (vendetta). Thus, the « Maute group » carries the name of the powerful familial clan of the Mautes who own, like the Ampatuans or others, a private army. The clan wars can be bloody.

The emergence of Salafism was also made possible by the inability of the Philippine government to durably solve the question of the right of the Moros to self-determination in Mindanao. The issue of peace is not firstly a military issue, but a historical, social and political one.

This said, the « caliphate », in whose name terrorists fight, is deeply extraneous to the local culture, quite far from self-withdrawal - the Maranao trading networks are found all over the country [4]. The ideology which claims the universality of religious purification was imported from the Middle East by two brothers leading the Maute clan [5]. It targets surely in priority the Christians, the non-believers who have no place in the Salafist order, but it assaults in fact, and in an extreme way, the Maranao society as a whole. The people did not rise up alongside the fundamentalists, they ran away.

Besides, there are various examples of Maranaos who delayed their departure to first assure that they can save the so-called « non-believers » put under their responsibility (especially the Moro bosses having Christian employees). In Marawi, Muslims thus hid Christians, risking their lives, providing them with appropriate clothes and made them learn to cry out « Allah is the greatest », with the right accent to make them able to cross the Salafist checkpoints.

However, in this situation of violence linked to the crisis, after the assassinations, the abductions and the destruction committed by Maute and their allies against the Christians, the risks of defiance, rejection, and fear reigning among the religious communities remain.

Solidarity is the most effective antidote. In the Lanao provinces, the big majority of displaced persons are Muslims - and a big part of popular aid is assured by members of Christian communities (who in order to do so learned how to cook halal). Aid is the occasion to « live together ». The social link is reestablished, including between communities.

Since some years now, the MiHands network sees intervention in situations of humanitarian crisis as a collective act, bringing together in daily life Moros, Lumads (mountain tribes) and descendants of Christian « settlers » who came from the centre and north of the archipelago. In the course of the catastrophes that strike all the « communities », simultaneously or one after the other, through the actions of such a network, aid has been proven mutual.

Until today, government support (police, army) continues to be sent to Mindanao, but the battle in Marawi will not last eternally. The stigma will not disappear though. The importance of people's solidarity will not fail, especially since it contributes in providing the bases of long lasting peace [6].

International aid, solidarity without borders

Our international solidarity aims firstly at helping people's networks to accomplish their tasks by reinforcing their financial resources.

Obviously, the MiHands network collects support in the Philippines itself, in nature or money-wise. It mobilizes militant forces at the least cost. The operational costs are very low. Nonetheless, the financial aid that we can furnish, no matter how limited it can be in relation to the needs, remains indispensable.

Making the situation in Mindanao known is, in addition, an indirect way of protecting the humanitarian volunteers from the culture of impunity which prevails under Duterte or from the arbitrary, peculiar to the martial law regime – and to prepare a democratic solidarity campaign in case of repression.

Finally, in the context of the Marawi crisis itself, facing the wish of the califat supremacy to break the links between communities, our action also operates as an antidote. The support comes from various countries, from France to Japan. It transmits a message of solidarity without religious borders, the exact opposite of the Salafist ideology. It thus strengthens the action engaged into locally around the same principles by people's aid networks. At a time where religious fundamentalisms assert themselves in a big part of the world and within numerous religions, where walls are built up in many parts of the globe, internationalism in action acquires a particular importance.

As of today, we have sent 9000 euros [now 13,000 €] to MiHands. We received 6.565,50 €, the difference taken from the permanent solidarity funds for Asia, constituted by our association, ESSF [see the update below]. Most of the donations specifically devoted to the Marawi crisis came from France, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands and Spain.

The campaign began in France [7] and it is too early still to have an idea of its extension internationally. Incidentally, donations have been expressed but not yet received.

We also contributed 6.000 € to a solidarity fund in the Philippines for it to temporarily help MiHands, but it has to be reconstituted (there) to meet other emergencies.

How does ESSF secure financing for solidarity ?

After some years of experience, we have constituted in 2012 a permanent solidarity fund for Asia. It gets punctual donations or regular transfers [10].

It enables us :

- to support in a regular way the activities of movements that we work with in four countries : Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines [8] (possibly China too),
- to provide aid punctually when the need arises, and where it is not possible to initiate a specific public campaign,
- to urgently send an initial amount of aid when a campaign is launched, without having to wait for the arrival of the first donations, which was done this time (immediate transfer of 3000 euros). In this case, it concerns here an advance in anticipation of the results of the campaign.

In general, we can no longer rely on the media coverage of humanitarian crisis situations. They have been « trivialized » and rarely comes up as information headlines, or else in an ephemeral way. The French press, for instance, in a large way, disregarded the situation in Marawi. Consequently, we should mobilize our own alert channels. We wish to do it with other networks, like in this case, with Cedetim/Ipam. We hope to contribute to nourishing a new « culture of solidarity » with all progressive movements. The area of intervention of ESSF is Asian, but it is clear that what is said here goes for the other regions in the world.

Pierre Rousset,

An update

After nearly two months, the battle of Marawi continues.

According to recent accounts, the number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) reaches 410,457 persons (89,589 families). Out of these, only 23,339 persons or 4,277 families are staying in 87 government identified evacuation centers (ECs) and 387,118 individuals or 85,312 families are staying in the homes of their relatives (home-based) mostly in Iligan City and the different municipalities of Lanao del Norte [9].

As it is often the case in the Philippines, most of the IDPs do not have (or did not take with them) identity cards. This issue has become a cause of harassment and discrimination against Maranaos and, more generally, Muslims even as far as Luzon in the north.

As of July 21, 2017, 13,000 € has been sent to MiHands through ESSF-Cedetim/Ipam initiative.

13070,50 € have been received.

Taking into account the costs (mostly banking costs), there is a temporary deficit of 479, 57 €, which should be made up for by future donations.

Pierre Rousset
ESSF

To send donations

Cheques

cheques to ESSF in euros only, payable in France, to be sent to:

ESSF

2, rue Richard-Lenoir

93100 Montreuil

France

Bank Account:

Crédit lyonnais

Agence de la Croix-de-Chavaux (00525)

10 boulevard Chanzy

93100 Montreuil

France

ESSF, account number 445757C

International bank account details :

IBAN : FR85 3000 2005 2500 0044 5757 C12

BIC / SWIFT : CRLYFRPP

Account holder : ESSF

Through PayPal

You can send money through Paypal: see the PayPal button on the upper right side of ESSF English home page:

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=sommaire&lang=en>

Footnotes

[1] Pierre Rousset, ESSF (article 40615), [Philippines: Three years after super typhoon Yolanda's passing, social reconstruction of damaged communities: The experience of MiHands in Ormoc, island of Leyte](#) :

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40615>

[2] Internal Displaced People (IDPs).

[3] Civilian Defense Forces.

[4] Randy David, ESSF (article 41405), [Philippines: The Maute Group and the Islamic State:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41405>

[5] Raymund de Silva, ESSF (article 41299), [Philippines: The Marawi Siege and Martial Law in Mindanao - Part I -:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41299>

[6] Raymund de Silva, ESSF (article 41389), [Philippines: The Marawi Siege and the Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao - Part II -:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41389>

[7] ESSF (article 41365), [Mindanao \(Philippines\) - Grassroot networks that help people fleeing fighting in Marawi are acting in an increasingly dangerous situation - They need our support now!:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41365>

[8] MiHands, ESSF (article 39943), [Many Thanks from the Philippines and Happy New Year 2017 ! - To all those who sent donations to ESSF in support of humanitarian disasters survivors:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39943>

[9] ESSF (article 41562), [Philippines: The Marawi Siege and the Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao - Part IV:](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41562>