

Philippines: Voices for peace echo in Mindanao People's Peace Summit

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Mindanao, the “land of promise” in the Philippines, has been drenched with the blood of thousands of Filipino brothers and sisters caught in a bitter conflict instigated by foreign and local elites who have taken control of Mindanao's wealthy resources. The tri-peoples of Mindanao – the Islamized Filipinos (Moros), other indigenous peoples (Lumads), and migrant Christians (Migrants) – bear the brunt of the civil war.

It is less known, even among Filipinos, that there exist organizations of tri-peoples struggling and working to build just peace. The Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (Mppm) was established in 2000 in the midst of then President Estrada's “total war” policy against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Milf). Mppm now has 150 member and partner grassroots organizations and serves as a venue for common struggles of the tri-peoples who have been living under one Mindanao sky during the last century.

This December 14 to the 18 of 2016, I joined the Mindanao Peoples' Peace March and the 8th Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit. I walked with the representatives of the tri-peoples and listened to their stories about their world views, history, and ongoing peace efforts. The Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit provided a safe and peaceful space for discourse and platform for solidarity and action in the pursuit of peace based on justice for the grassroots Moros, Lumads and Migrants. The successful Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit shows that peace and harmony is possible in Mindanao if the voices of the tri-peoples from the grassroots communities prevail.



Solidarity correspondent Merci L. Angeles marches with young Mindanaoans in the 54-km trek from Cotabato City to Midsayap, North Cotabato, where the 8th Mindanao People's Peace Summit was held.

Peace is Elusive in Mindanao

The 1968 Jabidah Massacre, where around 60 Moro soldiers were killed, and the unleashing of paramilitary groups identified to be “Christian” and Visayan [1] by the Marcos government ignited the founding of the Moro National Liberation Front (Mnlf) which rebelled against the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). [2] In 1976, the GRP and the Mnlf signed the Tripoli Agreement which acceded to Mnlf demands to grant autonomy to some provinces within Mindanao, called the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (Armm). However, the areas within the Armm continue to be the poorest in the country and the Armm Government has been accused of corruption and poor management. On the other hand, the Armm Administration claims that the Philippine Government did not fulfill the terms of the Tripoli Agreement.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Milf) broke away from the Mnlf after it entered into the peace agreement with the GRP. [3] The former president, Benigno Aquino III, negotiated and signed a peace agreement with the Milf, but the Basic Bangsamoro Law (BBL) that would establish the desired Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BAR) was not passed by the Philippine Congress during his term. Both the Mnlf and the Lumads demand their inclusion in the peace talks between the GRP and the Milf. The Mnlf has a stake in the peace talks, and so do the Lumads.

There are around thirty tribes of the Lumads, the first peoples of Mindanao who have lived there “since time immemorial” before the coming of Islam in the 15th century. Some Lumad tribes, like the Teduray and Lambangian, live inside territories claimed by the Milf, and they are also demanding that their right for self-determination be respected inside the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region that may be formed.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is continuing the peace talks, and has promised to include representatives of the Mnlf and the Lumads in the Bangsamoro Transition Commission that is being organized. Yet peace is still elusive in Mindanao. On September 2 of 2016, a bomb went off in a crowded public plaza in Davao City, killing 14 people and injuring more than 60 people. Bomb threats were also received in Iligan City, Metro Manila and other urban and strategic cities. The perpetrators have not been arrested and there are many possible suspects because of the presence of rebel groups that have broken away from the Milf, [4] and terrorist groups like the Abu Sayyaf, which sow violence through kidnappings and bombing of public places like Catholic churches.

The New People’s Army (NPA), the armed unit of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), has several military fronts in areas which are not occupied by the Moros. Some Lumad tribes accuse the NPA of entering their ancestral domains without permission from the Lumad elders. They also charge both the NPA and the military of forcing their people to take up arms, which is contrary to their desire for non-violence in their ancestral domains.

The 8th Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Summit

Three hundred and sixty (360) delegates from the Lumads, Moros and Migrants from all over Mindanao gathered at the summit to try to find a peaceful and just solution. Peace and human rights advocates from all over the Philippines and other countries also came to express solidarity with the work and struggle of the tri-peoples.

The summit opened with Rodelio “Yatz” Ambangan, [5] a leader of the Erumanen ne Menuvu, [6] stating the summit’s objectives: enhancing the awareness and understanding of the tri-people participants on the current context, and providing an avenue for participants to build partnership

with individuals, communities and organizations to advance their local struggles and endeavors for peace and human rights.



Rodelio “Yatz” Ambangan, Lumad leader, college professor, and Chairperson of the Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Movement, gives the Opening Address in the 8th Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Summit.

The Mpps had been held every two years since 2000; in 2010 it became a triennial gathering of peace and human rights advocates. Each summit anchored its theme on the prevailing context and developments in the country, in particular Mindanao. The historic 2016 Mpps featured guest speakers from the different Peace Negotiating Panels of revolutionary groups that the Government of the Republic of the Philippines is currently engaged with, as well as from the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (Opapp). An academic expert from the Mindanao State University discoursed on federalism, which President Duterte is pushing for in the Philippine Congress. The Keynote Speaker, Atty. Jose Luis Martin Gascon, the Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, addressed the Summit delegates about a burning issue in Mindanao and the whole country in the midst of the Duterte government’s “war on drugs” and extrajudicial killings.

This year’s thematic workshops showed the Mppm leaders and members’ goal of understanding and engaging with the multifaceted issues and concerns of tri-peoples: climate change; issues, challenges and opportunities for youth under the Duterte administration; prospects for women under the Duterte government; migration; sustainable ecological agriculture as alternative for food sovereignty, and militarism in Asia and its impact in the Philippines.

Throughout the Summit, participants discussed the key issues that must be addressed to bring peace in Mindanao: the advancement of the Moro and Lumads’ right to self-determination, justice and human rights, and work for sustainable development through ecologically-sound initiatives. Representatives from the tri-peoples gave testimonials about their life and experiences in the struggle for peace, and how their work with Mppm has improved and changed their lives.



Participants in the Workshop on Militarism in Asia and Its Impact on the Philippines reported on their Workshop Results and expressed solidarity with the No Nukes Campaign of the Japanese people.

Voices of the Tri-Peoples

The Lumad leaders whom I met during the Summit remember a time when there was peace and abundance in their homelands. Ronaldo “Jojo” Ambangan, the Secretary General of the Indigenous Political System of the Erumanen Ne Menuvu, described the stories of the origin of their people, and their world views where Land and Nature are respected. “The land is alive; we cannot own it. We

are only stewards.”

According to Ronaldo, the Erumanen Ne Menuvu is a community of peace: “We do not just talk peace, we live it.” In the olden days, there were no thieves, as their elders shared generously with their neighbors. They planted sugar cane along the road outside their homes, so that a hungry stranger who passed by could eat, even if the home owners were away.

The Erumanen ne Menuvu and other Lumads welcomed migrants from Luzon because they believed that since land gave life preventing others from farming it was like killing them. However, they were not aware that the American colonizers and the Philippine Government had enshrined the Regalian doctrine [7] and nullified the traditional system of land disposition. Since 1913, the Lumads have found themselves displaced and dispossessed in their own traditional territories. Their communal customary laws and indigenous justice system were not recognized and they were voiceless in governance. Their culture was rapidly slipping away before their eyes and their numbers became a minority.

MPPM has helped to build the capacity of the Lumad leaders in engaging with the Philippine Government as they struggle for the recognition of their ancestral domains and their right to self-determination as a people.

Rodelio Ambangan, who had opened the summit, is also the Chairperson of the Katawhang Lumad (Lumad Peoples). He shared the lessons learned by the Lumad leaders: “As leaders of Indigenous Peoples, we continue to be vigilant, reflective and active. Our vital enemy is a structure which never sleeps – it encompasses an unjust system of governance, policies and programs which destroy our collective dignity, identity and well-being as a people. Rodelio also gives the course of action for the Lumads: “Among those proven effective defenses is regenerating our self-governance, the indigenous political structure that advances our will and self-determination!”

Habbas Camendan, [8] the Chairperson of the Katawhang Moro of Mppm, and Mppm Vice-Chairperson, gave testimony about his life. As a young boy in the 70s, he witnessed how the Ilaga, paramilitary Christians organized by the Marcos government, killed fellow Moro villagers who were harvesting rice in the fields. Two years later, he narrowly escaped being killed in a massacre of evacuees in their village in Cotabato, where 100 Moros died. “I was able to escape, but I was traumatized. I felt that I had no choice: *lumaban o mapatay* – fight or get killed. The Moro peoples felt helpless without our own army to defend us. I joined the Mnlf and I was a fighter in the Bangsa Moro Army for five years.’ “When I joined the MPPM in 2010, I learned that there is a way of fighting where you will not kill and be killed, there is an alternative to war – the use of peaceful and legal means,” concluded Habbas.

Yennah Torres [9] of the Katawhang Migrante shared testimony about her life. In 2000, Yennah was one of the conveners of the Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Movement. Yennah recalled the civil war being raged at that time in some areas of Mindanao due to the “total war” strategy used by President Estrada against the Moros who were struggling for self-determination. The Mppm united tri-peoples in the communities to demand the government to stop the war and respect human rights. It also provided relief and rehabilitation assistance to the hundreds of thousands of evacuees who were displaced from the war zones. Yennah, like the other members of the MPPM, believes that the historical injustices committed against the tri-peoples must be corrected so that there will be real and lasting peace in Mindanao.

Written by Merci-Llarinas Angeles (Solidarity Correspondent, Peace Women Partners)

Sources:

Proceedings of the 8th Mindanao Peoples' Peace Summit, held on December 15-18, 2016 in SCC, Midsayap, North Cotabato, Philippines

Personal interviews with Ronaldo Ambangan, Rodelio Ambangan, Habbas Camendan and Yennah Torres conducted between December 15, 2016 – January 22, 2017.

Our Call for Full Inclusion: A Collection of Articles on Peace, Indigenous People's Rights, and the Bangsamoro Basic Law, published by Loyukan, Quezon City, Philippines, August 2015.

P.S.

* <http://iscenter.or.kr/english/2017/01/30/mindanao-peace-process-conference/#return-note-1749-8>

Footnotes

[1] The Visayas Region is the third largest region in the Philippines outside Mindanao.

[2] Marcos would use the Moro rebellion as one of the reasons for declaring martial law in 1972.

[3] The Milf leaders did not agree to the formation of the Armm, they wanted to secede from the Philippines at the time. Though in the current peace talks, the Milf has agreed to abandon secession, and to form the BAR instead.

[4] There is a ceasefire between the GRP and the Milf, which has been in place since the signing of the peace agreement between the two parties in 2014.

[5] Rodelio is an agriculturist and the Director for Extension of the Southern Christian College (SCC), the host of the event and one of the institutions that has helped to organize MPPM since its inception in 1999.

[6] The Erumanen ne Menuvu are one of around 30 tribes of the non-Islamized Lumads of Mindanao.

[7] Under this concept, private title to land must be traced to some grant, express or implied, from the Spanish Crown or its successors, the American Colonial Government, and thereafter, the Philippine Republic. The Lumads and Moros did not have titles for their lands, so these lands were declared public lands belonging to the State.

[8] In 2000, Habbas was invited to attend the first MPPM Summit in Davao City, and he was elected to be a member of the Council of Moro Leaders. Now, Habbas volunteers as an officer of MPPM, and teaches Human Rights and Environmental Protection and Management from Islamic Perspective in the Southern Christian College. He also lectures to Interfaith groups on the Role of Religion in Peace-building, and Islamic Perspectives in Peace-building.

[9] Yennah is the Executive Director of the Cotabato City-based Tri-People's Organization Against Disasters, Fdn (Tripod) that provides services to the people affected by the natural and man-made disasters in Mindanao. She is also a convener of the Mindanao Tri-people Women Resource

Center (Mtwrc), a member organization of MPPM that renders services for the Moro, Lumad and Migrant women. Yennah brings the voice of the women of Mindanao locally and globally as she shares their experiences of development aggression in many areas in Mindanao. They are putting forward their critique of the current development framework advanced by the Philippine government and the global capitalist system.