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Religion, Rights of Minorities and Violence in Asia and Pacific
Focus on the Conflict in Mindanao, Philippines

A. Brief Background:

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines and home to an estimated 18 million people as of 2000 (about one fourth of the Philippine population).

The peoples of Mindanao include 13 Islamised ethno-linguistic groups – collectively known as the *Bangsa Moro* (Moro nation) – and more than 18 other indigenous peoples who call themselves *Lumad*. The third group is made up of descendants of migrants or settlers who have been arriving in the island since the early 20th century. This third group is predominantly Christian. The approximate population percentages: 75% are Christian, 20% are Moro and 5% are Lumad.

The beginning of the conflict in Mindanao can be traced back to the colonial era, more than three centuries ago, when Spain conquered most of other Philippine islands but failed to establish control over the Muslim sultanates of Mindanao. The intermittent warfare sowed the seeds of animosity between Muslim and Christian peoples of the archipelago: Spain used the Christianized Filipino troops while Muslim raiders attacked Spanish-controlled coastal settlements. In the early 20th century the US colonial regime incorporated Mindanao into the Philippine state. It encouraged settlers from the more densely populated islands to settle in Mindanao and corporations to establish huge plantations, a policy that was continued by the post colonial Philippine governments. The Muslims resented the takeover of their lands. The loss of territory was a key issue leading to the outbreak of war in the 1970s.

Loss of land meant loss of income and an insecure food supply. Basic services such as health and education that were provided by government in predominantly Muslim areas were also significantly lower than in the rest of the country. Muslim politicians and traditional leaders also felt marginalized politically because the influx of Christian settlers created Christian electoral majorities in formerly Muslim areas.

There was also prejudice against the Muslims. An unfortunate saying that has become common among non-Muslims depicts this discrimination: “A good Moro is a dead Moro.” Furthermore the Muslims felt that their culture and identity were being suppressed in favor of a national identity based on values of the majority group, the Christian Filipinos.

The immediate events that triggered the full-scale war and the organization of the Moro National Liberation Front in the early 1970s were: the Jabidah Massacre of 1968, when a group of young Moro recruits were killed by their army superiors; a series of paramilitary atrocities against the Muslims in the early 1970s; the shift of political power from the Muslims to the Christians particularly in the Cotabato and Lanao provinces; and the proclamation of Martial Law in 1972. Libya and other Islamic countries intervened leading

to negotiations between the government and the MNLF. The negotiations led to the Tripoli Agreement of December 1976 which provided for an autonomous regional government. Because of disputes over implementation, war resumed. Negotiations were started again in 1986 but these did not result into a peace accord because of continuing disputes over the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement.

In 1996, a peace accord was signed between the MNLF and the government. The agreement provided for new institutions led by the MNLF and supported by the government. The MNLF scaled down its demands from separation to autonomy. By this time, however, another group has emerged and gained military strength, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and it is currently the key rebel group in Mindanao.

In 2000 then President Estrada declared all-out war against the MILF after the takeover of a Lanao del Norte townhall. The war was popular with the Christian population. It seemed that the people had lumped the MILF with the explicitly anti-Christian Abu Sayyaf group which was notorious for kidnapping and killing their hostages. However, the civil society in Mindanao was vocal in its opposition to the war..

In 2001, the Arroyo government focused on the peace talks. A ceasefire agreement was signed between the MILF and the government but since then there have been ceasefire violations that each party claimed were perpetrated by the other.

Following the September 11 attacks and ensuing “war on terrorism,” it was feared that an inappropriate assumption might be made, i.e., that the Moros, particularly the mass base of the MILF, are supporters of terrorism and that the historical roots of the conflict might be neglected.

There was renewed fighting in February 2003 when the military attacked MILF positions, claiming that a group of kidnappers were being harbored by the MILF. This new confrontation caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Philippine civil society groups and religious leaders, including the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and The Bishops-Ulama Conference, as well as foreign governments (Malaysia and the OIC) have called for the warring parties to restart the stalled negotiation process.

Preparations for the resumption of the peace talks between the government and the MILF are currently ongoing and hopes remain high that the talks would resume soon.

B. Notes on the Panel Questions

1. Who are the key players in the violence? Who and where are the victims of the violence?

The key players are the government forces, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the Abu Sayyaf which is a much smaller group but is considered more radical and violent.

The victims of the violence are mainly the civilians or non-combatants who are caught in the crossfire. They are predominantly Muslim because the fighting ordinarily erupts in particular places in Mindanao where they comprise the majority of the population.

At the height of the fighting in 2003 it was estimated that some 300,000 people fled their homes and became IDPs (internally displaced persons). They lived in makeshift evacuation centers and could not return to their fields to work, because of the fighting. Many especially children died because of illnesses contracted while at the evacuation centers.

2. What are the relations between the different religious and ethical traditions in the Philippines?

The main religious/spiritual and ethical traditions in the Philippines are Christianity, Islam and Indigenous. In addition, other traditions are also present: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. On the whole and on the surface, the relations are cordial especially among the religious leaders. However, deep prejudices exist between the Muslims and Christians due to historical circumstances explained in the background. (The current tension/animosity/conflict is not due to religion-based differences but is a result of the dispossession and political-economic marginalization of Muslims).

3. Which tensions or conflicts have cross-border effects?

The Muslim-Christian tension certainly has cross border effects. The Philippines has as its neighbors two predominantly Muslim countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, active members of the OIC or Organization of Islamic Conference. For one, fighting in Mindanao has resulted into some undocumented migration of Mindanao's Muslims into these neighboring countries, with its attendant hardships on the part of the illegal migrants. Their forced repatriation by Malaysia 2 years ago created strained relations between the Philippine and Malaysian governments because of reported abuses from Malaysian police officers. Another effect is that perceived oppression of Muslims in the Philippines helps fuel the wave of militant Islamic solidarity in Southeast Asia and beyond. On the positive side, however, Malaysia has taken a mediating role in the conflict.

4. What are the prospects of a constructive dialogue and collaboration among ethnic and religious communities?

There are good prospects. There have been groups and organizations within the Philippines that have made inter-religious/intercultural dialogue as their primary goal. Among said groups are: The Bishops-Ulama Forum, Silsilah Dialogue Movement and the Peacemakers Circle. The first two are Mindanao-based. In addition there are other groups that support the Mindanao tri-people's cooperation, through education and advocacy.

The Bishops-Ulama Forum are religious leaders from both the Christian Churches and the Islamic communities who have come together to help promote dialogue among themselves and among their members. The BUF has actively promoted the “Mindanao Week of Peace” which is marked every year from the last Thursday of November to the first Wednesday of December.

The Silsilah Dialogue Movement promotes better understanding and relations between Muslims and Christians, and together, with people of other faiths. Among its programs are: non formal education, aimed at valuing the religious tradition of everyone; offering of courses on the culture of dialogue with accreditation by government and non government institutions and universities; media links and publications to reach a wider base; and a harmony villages which has a training center, a small mosque and a small chapel for the joint use of Muslims and Christians who live in the area and others who go there for activities.

The Peacemakers Circle is based in Metro Manila and is composed of members from diverse religious, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions who seek to actualize the highest ideals of their own faith and engage in cooperative activities. Among these activities are the conduct of workshops and the support of the projects of a mixed Muslim-Christian community in Metro Manila.

More recently, the Miriam College Center for Peace Education collaborated with other Peace Education Centers located in Columbia University, New York; Seisen University, Tokyo; and Lebanese American University, Byblos, Lebanon. Collectively they started a project called “The Spiritual and Ethical Foundations of Peace Education”. Phase 2 of the project included the conduct of a workshop for faculty of colleges of education all over the Philippines. Materials and sample teaching techniques on building inter-religious understanding were presented in said workshop. The idea is to draw inspiration from living faiths toward reconciliation and peace.

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End Note:

1. The brief backgrounder was culled from the following materials:

Concepcion, Sylvia, *et. al.* *Breaking the Links between Economics and Conflict in Mindanao*. London: International Alert, 2004.

Mastura, Datu Michael. “Response to the Conference Recommendations,” *Waging Peace in the Philippines*. Quezon City: GZO Peace Institute, 2003.

Santos, Soliman Jr. *The Moro Islamic Challenge*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

