



Peace Monitor

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STRIVING FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN A POVERTY, WAR STRICKEN REGION



The most troubled region in the southern part of the Philippines, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has been consistently ranked at the bottom in terms of human development indicators for the past years. The latest Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program showed that the ARMM ranked lowest in per capita income, education-related indicators, among others (De la Paz and Colson, 2008). Aggravating the situation are the infamous events which left a mark on the island's history. Who will ever forget the gruesome massacre of journalists in 2009, the large scale displacement due to armed conflict in 2008, the Buliok offensives in 2003 and the attack at Camp Abubakr in 2000. These events somehow pose threats to the formal peace processes between the government and the Moro fronts and darkened the state of unpeace of the region's populace.

For decades now, achieving a lasting peace and sustainable development has increasingly becoming an important goal for Mindanaoans, particularly in this war and poverty-stricken region. The concluded peace negotiations between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996 was expected to address the decade-old armed struggle and as well as bring development to the region. Yet, it failed to do so due to the alleged failure of the government to implement the key provisions of the forged Final Peace Agreement (FPA) (Diaz, 2010) and lack of genuine participation of all stakeholders and even against the will of the MNLF (Garcia, 2009). Former President Fidel V. Ramos, in a statement has affirmed that the ARMM populace still suffer from abject poverty even after 13 years of FPA implementation (Abbas, 2009). The region's economic condition is still "too bad" and its political system and democratic process is at "its lowest level" (Ong, 2009). Thus, the said peace pact, though considered a milestone in the history of the country's peace processes, brought little significant difference in the lives of the people on the ground. As shown in the latest Human Development Index (HDI), the region has been consistently ranked at the bottom in terms of quality of life and poverty indicators from years 1997-2006 (Arguillas, 2009).

The deplorable situation of the ARMM's population, especially the Bangsamoro people, and their continued struggle to regain their ancestral domain urged the MILF to wage another armed struggle. Peace and development actors working in the region were clear in asking, if a peace

agreement with the MILF be signed soon, will this be genuinely implemented or will have the same fate with the 1996 FPA? For more than three decades of talking peace, what gains did ARMM people have? In terms of ODA, did they really gain from billion worth of peace and development programs poured in the region? Did the people engaged in the peace process really have leveled-off in their understanding of the root causes of the peace problem in Mindanao?

A closer look at Muslim Mindanao

ARMM is composed of the five Muslim-dominated provinces of Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Tawi-tawi, Sulu and Maguindanao, and the City of Marawi. It is the only region in the country that has an autonomous government by virtue of the Republic Act (RA) 6734 of 1987 which was later amended through RA 9054 (DAF, n.d). Based on the 2003 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ARMM is one of the poorest regions in the country with the poverty incidence of 45 percent. It has the lowest per capita income, lowest level of primary education enrollment and simple literacy. Though the region's current population is relatively small, there is a possibility that it will grow significantly in the coming years as the region recorded the highest annual population growth rate of 5.5 percent. This has been attributed to high fertility rate and low contraceptive use in the region. This poses threat to the environment and natural resource' use, the existing poor health condition and low socio-economic status of the region (de la Paz and Colson, 2008).



ARMM's economic struggle despite natural wealth

ARMM is endowed with rich natural resources, from its vast and fertile agricultural land, abundant fishing industry, minerals and potential sources of energy (PDI, 2010). Seventy percent (around 803,763 hectares) of its 1.4 million total land area has been classified as primary agricultural land where *palay*, root crops, vegetables and fruits were cultivated. ARMM produces 70 percent of the country's total seaweed production which have been exported to the United States, Japan and Europe. The region's fish produce from commercial and municipal fishing and as well as aqua-culture were also very abundant particularly in the provinces of Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Basilan, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur (Wee, 2006).

Yet, despite of this richness, majority of its people continued to live in abject poverty. Thousands remains homeless and depends on relief goods for their daily sustenance. Many are constantly displaced and some 12,000 households (approximately 48,000 persons)

are still cramping at the evacuation areas as of August 2010 (Luwaran, 2010a). These deplorable situations had been experienced by the region for several years already. This situation of the ARMM is caused by various circumstances. First, this could have been due to the protracted armed conflict that has plagued the region and other parts of Mindanao for more than four decades.

On one hand, the limitation set by the law creating the ARMM has also exacerbated the region's condition. Lanao del Sur Assemblyman, Ziaur-Rahman Adiong, lamented that they have been deprived with their right to manage and control their local resources, especially their strategic minerals. Article X, Section 1 of the Republic Act (RA) 9054, *an Act To Strengthen and Expand the Organic, amending for the purpose RA 6734 entitled "An Act Providing for the ARMM"* states that the autonomous government shall have control over its ancestral domain which include pasture lands, worship areas, burial grounds, forests and fields, mineral resources except for the strategic minerals there in such as "uranium, coal, petroleum; and other fossil fuels, mineral oils, and all sources of potential energy; lakes, rivers, and lagoons; and national reserves and marine parks, as well as forest and watershed reservations". As such, foreign companies like the US-based ExxonMobil Exploration and Production B.V were the ones permitted by the central government to exploit Lake Lanao for hydroelectricity production and explore oil deposits in Tawi-Tawi. Adiong alleged that the expected 750 million barrels of oil expected to be extracted from the said area would not directly benefit the local communities (PDI, 2010).

The effects of protracted war

Since the 1960s, many of the region's municipalities had been home to on and off armed conflicts, both representing the vertical armed challenges which is characterized by the political, separatist, rebellion-related, top-down conflicts between the Moro Fronts- MNLF and MILF- and the central government. Along with this also exist the horizontal conflicts. These are the community-based violence among clans



or within the clan or communities. Since the war broke up between the Moro Fronts and the government forces, more than two million people have been displaced and an estimated 120,000 people were killed (Lara and Champain, 2009). Added to these are the destruction of the million worth of properties and the millions spent by the government for war armories and weaponries (Santos, 2005). The main sources of livelihood of displaced families were also destroyed. Farmlands basically become battlefields during armed encounters. Houses were torched rendering thousands of homeless families. In Maguindanao areas, almost 4,000 houses were totally and partially damaged during the 2008 war (NDCC, 2009).

The children's right to education has also been curtailed. In Southwestern Mindanao (Region XII) four out of 10 children missed schooling due to armed conflicts. This ratio is three times higher than the national average based on the data gathered by E-Net Philippines (Mindanews, 2009). In Datu Piang alone, a municipality in Maguindanao province wherein the biggest IDP count was recorded, 59 percent or around 6,000 school-aged children had stopped schooling during the post MOA-AD conflict in 2008. Prioritizing the need for daily subsistence and food rations are hardly enough to feed the whole

family, most parents chose not to send their children to school. Some pupils, whose schools were assigned as temporary evacuation camps for the displaced families, could also hardly concentrate in their classes (AFRIM, 2009a).

Weak governance

Weak governance is manifested through "poor or even absence of delivery of basic social services and absenteeism of local government officials". Communities in Mindanao, particularly in ARMM areas, lamented that services from the government seldom or never reached intended beneficiaries and that some government officials, especially Mayors in Maguindanao, do not regularly hold office during weekdays. These politicians also build their houses not in the areas where they supposed to serve but in urban centers such as in Cotabato City or Davao City (AFRIM, 2009b).

Another issue is the alleged misuse of internal revenue allotment (IRA) and the prevalence of illegal underground economy that is being controlled by the ARMM politicians (Lara, 2010). Apparently, there are lucrative businesses in the ARMM, but since these are illegal, the gains eventually go to few individuals' pockets and do not translate into community development programs or social services in which people could benefit. The persistence of conflict made the region conducive for the proliferation of illegal activities such as drug trafficking, unlicensed arms trading and mining, smuggling, among others. While these activities benefited the reigning political clans, the local communities continue to suffer from hunger (Lara and Champain, 2009). These increasing criminal and illegal activities in the ARMM have furthered the region's economic and political



struggle. Narco-politicians in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur which allowed for the proliferation of drug addicts caused various crimes in the region (AFRIM, 2009).

Impact of ODA-funded peace and development projects

Despite of billions of Official Development Assistance (ODA) intended for the country's peace and development programs, the deplorable situation of the ARMM apparently remained the same. Does this mean that ODA does not have much impact in securing peace and development for Mindanao, and ARMM in particular? An article authored by Alicor L. Panao published at the UP Forum Online (January-February 2010 Issue) tried to answer the same question of why foreign aid failed in Mindanao. Aside from corruption issues, Panao cited the need for ODA projects to be endogenous and participatory. Foreign-funded projects should be responsive to the particular needs of the community and that the local government must have the opportunity to participate in the whole process- from planning, implementation up to monitoring of the said projects. This is somehow contrary to what usually happens with ODA-funded projects. A study conducted by the World Bank in 2003 has found out that many ODAs are national or Mindanao-wide in scope, and not specifically targeted for the ARMM. Only one out of

projects is intended for Mindanao and only one out of 20 projects is for implementation in the province of the ARMM (Panao, 2010). In addition, based on the evaluation of ODA-funded programs and projects in Mindanao, many of these projects did not sustain because of failure to tap local initiatives and resources, both human and natural even during the conceptualization of the project up to the implantation stage. The capacity of the local community must have been factored in to ensure the continuity of the project (AFRIM, 2009a)

The recurrent conflicts also lessened the region's opportunity to be beneficiary of ODAs. The conflicts compelled donor agencies to "scale down or suspend if not cancel outright" their project implementation. In some cases, projects are also transferred to less hostile communities which have the same need (Ibid). On the other hand, large scale armed conflicts which caused displacements of hundred thousands of people also tend to draw in more foreign aids which focus more on the relief, rehabilitation and recovery programs for conflict-affected areas.

Voices from the ground

During the ARMM Regional Peace Summit held in September, the ARMM officials identified issues that need urgent actions of

the regional as well as the central government. These include issues pertaining to the region's poor access and control of its natural resources, inadequate delivery of basic social services, land conflicts, among others (ARMM Official Website, 2010).

Other urgent calls espoused during a peace consultation in Maguindanao are the strengthening of the existing education and capability programs in the ARMM, promotion of leadership integrity and good governance among the Bangsamoro leaders, and the effective and immediate implementation of socio-economic and development programs especially for the rehabilitation of the internally displaced persons (Luwaran, 2010b).

Somehow, some of these calls were congruent to the present Aquino administration's priorities in responding to the Mindanao situation, particularly in negotiating peace with the MILF. Good governance is on top of his agenda for the island. Next to it is the delivery of basic services especially in conflict-affected areas, social security reform, and coordination with local government units in the delivery of services.

Furthermore, aside from promoting peace education in the formal and informal processes, part of the Mindanao Development Authority's (MinDA) peace and security plan is "to secure a consolidated peace agreement with MNLF and MILF, and a definitive political settlement with the National Democratic Front (NDF), pursue disarmament, demobilization and re-integration (DDR) of all former combatants".

The culture of peace should also be promoted through education and information mechanisms, security sector reform should be institutionalized, and that the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples should be strengthened in order to protect and defend indigenous people's rights and ancestral lands (Cajulao, 2010).

Resolving the multi-faceted peace and development issues in Mindanao, particularly in the ARMM, needs the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders. The local leaders and the communities themselves must be involved in the whole process, not just mere recipients of the projects. They must have a hand in designing and planning stages to ensure sustainability of the project and trickling down of benefits to the communities. This could inculcate the sense of ownership which can greatly contribute to the success and sustainability of any peace and development program in the region. This holds true to the peace processes in Mindanao. Civil society groups have been calling for inclusiveness of the peace talks, urging local communities to assert for their right to be heard through proper consultations.

Consultations conducted among various sectors in Mindanao can be considered in the current GRP-MILF peace negotiation. The move to consolidate all consultations pertaining to Mindanao's peace processes by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Process (OPPAP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through the Mindanao Studies Consortium Foundation, Inc. can be a right start. The product of the consolidation can be a substantial input to both peace panels as they gear up for the resumption of the peace talks. Aside from the armed conflict between the Moro Fronts and the government forces,

the low-level, clan-based or community level conflicts must be taken into account in the peace negotiations so as to address the continuing displacement of the people and the protracted conflict in Muslim Mindanao.

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A quarterly analyses on the updates of the peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF. It also contains issues involving efforts of the government and the civil society towards peace and development in Mindanao.

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