

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE MINDANAO PEACE PROCESS AND THE COMMUNIST FRONT OF WAR AND PEACE: INITIAL NOTES AND THOUGHTS

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In the KONSULT MINDANAW! Concept Paper, the scope of the consultation is envisioned as follows: “The consultation will reach the whole of Mindanao... While the BUC [Bishops-Ulama Conference] realizes that the areas directly affected by conflict are on high priority, it also acknowledges the fact that the problem goes beyond those covered by the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity. For the sake of focus, however, the consultation will not directly tackle the conflict related to the National Democratic Front and the New People’s Army.” That focus is well taken. At the same time, we must also start thinking of the interrelation of what we often refer to as the Mindanao Conflict and the corresponding Mindanao Peace Process, on one hand, and what we might call the Communist front of war and peace, on the other. These are initial notes and thoughts on the matter that may also provide some basis for further and deeper research and analysis.

The Mindanao Conflict and A Tale of Two Insurgencies

When we speak of the Mindanao Conflict, we usually refer to the conflict on the Moro front; i.e. the vertical-structural conflict between the Moro people (through their liberation fronts) and the central government of the Philippines, as well as the horizontal-relational conflict between the Moro people and the two other major peoples who share the island region of Mindanao, namely the majority mainstream Christian settlers/migrants/descendants and the indigenous highlander tribes collectively referred to as the Lumad. This Mindanao Conflict has been most directly felt through armed hostilities in Muslim Mindanao and nearby provinces, basically Central and Western Mindanao, including the island provinces of Basilan and Sulu, having gone on intermittently in those regions for nearly four decades. This conflict is felt in the whole of Mindanao, though to a less direct extent in the mainly Christian regions Northern, Eastern and Southern Mindanao. It is also felt, though to the least direct extent, in the rest of the Philippines north of Mindanao, namely the two other island regions of the Visayas and Luzon, where the capital “Imperial Manila” is located – but still directly enough by the families of soldier casualties who are from the Visayas and Luzon.

But if we take the whole Philippines, it is really a tale of two insurgencies: the nationwide (except for strongly Muslim areas) communist insurgency mainly of the CPP-NPA-NDF and the Moro insurgency in Muslim Mindanao. The latter insurgency is represented by the MNLF and the groups it spawned -- principally the MILF which has

since surpassed it as main standard bearer of Moro rebellion, and the ASG which represents a mutation in the combination of rebellion, banditry and terrorism.

The CPP-NPA conflict is the longest-running Maoist insurgency in the world. Its “protracted people’s war” is aimed at overthrowing the government and replacing it with a socialist-oriented ‘national-democratic’ system. For the past four decades the CPP-NPA has been building up its mass bases in rural areas, while simultaneously setting up organizational support structures in the city. It has yet to achieve the critical mass of support it needs to move beyond the first of its envisaged three phases of war, the strategic defensive.

In contrast to the nationwide communist conflict, the Moro rebels seek control only over a portion of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. In broad terms, this conflict can be viewed as a clash between two imagined nations, Filipino and Moro, each with their own narratives of war. The Moro insurgents talk of regaining sovereignty over their historic homelands, while for the Philippine government they represent a threat to territorial integrity in an area where they are no longer the majority population. The conflict is currently unfolding along three concurrent tracks: the MNLF signed a peace agreement in 1996 which is being implemented, inadequately the group would say; the MILF has been in peace talks with the government since 1997; and the ASG is waging a terror campaign that has made it a target of the post-11 September 2001 US-led “global war on terror.”

Though different in aims, strategy, ideology, and geography, there is much to link the two conflicts. First, the signal year for both is 1968, when President Ferdinand Marcos was three years into his 20-year despotic rule. This was the year when the CPP was reestablished as a Maoist party, just a few months before its armed force, the NPA, initiated its war; and when the precursor to the MNLF, the Muslim (later Mindanao) Independence Movement, was formed, after the “Jabidah Massacre” of Muslim trainees by their Filipino officers earlier that year. In other words, both insurgencies have already reached the 40-year or four-decade mark in 2008, almost in tandem, with all their ups and downs. This provides a formidable backdrop as we enter their fifth decade which could well be the period of resolution, one way or the other.

Second, both insurgencies derive power and legitimacy from the poverty and disenfranchisement that besets much of the Philippine and Moro population. More than one-third of the country’s 81 million people live under the national poverty line, with Muslim Mindanao as the poorest of the poor, and the country now lags behind its neighbours Thailand and Malaysia in terms of human development and living standards. The NPA strongholds tend to be in rural areas bereft of government presence and services, principally in Luzon, Visayas, and non-Muslim (mainly northern and eastern) Mindanao. For the armed groups in Muslim (mainly central and southwestern) Mindanao, poverty and poor governance is compounded by the historic marginalization of Islamized ethno-linguistic groups in their own homeland, with roots dating back to Spanish colonization in the 16th Century.

Though recognized by all, the root problems of poverty, poor governance, and injustice have been insufficiently addressed by the authoritarian Marcos regime and the debt-ridden governments that succeeded him, some of which have, like Marcos, been accused of corruption. This fuels the anti-government fervor that leads some people to join insurgencies. And at the most basic level of motivation, when poverty strips areas of livelihood opportunities, rebel groups represent a source of food and education. Indeed, some analysts have found a correlation between the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s and a resurgence of recruits to the NPA.

A third similarity between the conflicts is their common enemy, the Philippine state. Successive administrations have employed similar tactics on both the communist and Moro fronts. There have been attempts to defeat the rebels militarily, most notably Marcos under his brutal martial law regime (1972–81), but also the “all-out” wars against the MILF under Joseph Estrada and currently against the Communist insurgents under President Gloria Arroyo who in June 2006 pledged at least P1 billion to the effort. Despite their superior strength—which has been bolstered by a 50,000-strong civilian militia and, more recently, with technical support offered by the United States under the rubric of fighting terrorism—military victory has eluded the security forces and is unlikely in the near future.

Economic and psychological tactics have been used in tandem to weaken and divide the insurgents, for instance by buying off or co-opting individual rebel leaders, or by funding development projects that offer alternative livelihoods to combatants. This lower intensity war has won some successes, though not without costs. The lack of places on reintegration programs for the MNLF and of funding for development projects pledged as part of a peace process with the MILF are experiences that weigh heavy on ongoing and future peace processes.

Rethinking the Mindanao Conflict

As if the conflict on the Moro front with its three concurrent tracks represented by the MNLF, MILF and ASG were not already more than a handful to reckon with in Mindanao, one must also reckon with the conflict on the Communist front which is now not only, though still mainly, represented by the CPP-NPA-NDF as there are several of its breakaway factions operating in Mindanao. In fact, **the conflict on the Communist front for some time already has covered a much bigger portion of the territory and population of Mindanao than that covered by the conflict on the Moro front.** In a manner of speaking, we might say that this somewhat reflects the historical and systematic marginalization and minoritization of the Moros in their own original homeland of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan (Minsupala), or more precisely Mindanao, Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan (MinSuBaTaPa).

Of course, the big reduction of Moro territory over the decades does not have a one-is-to-one correspondence with any reduction of the impact of the Moro conflict on the rest of Mindanao. On the contrary, it has had the cumulative effect of heightening

Moro grievances, particularly a sense of injustice to the territorial integrity of their ancestral homeland, aside from feelings of injustice to their identity, political sovereignty and integral development in terms of a Moro Islamic way of life.¹ Exploding in the form of Moro armed resistance led by the MNLF against the Marcos martial law dictatorship in the early 1970s, it has become the *most critical expression or cutting edge* of the Mindanao Problem – a problem of relationships among three main peoples there and their relationships with the central Philippine government. One might therefore say that, as far as Mindanao is concerned, the conflict on the Moro front is *more qualitative than quantitative*. It has volatile elements of communal and religious conflict, e.g. Moros/Muslims vs. Filipinos/Christians, that one does not see in the less visceral social class conflict of poor vs. rich Filipinos on the Communist front. Thus, while the corresponding peace processes on the Moro and Communist fronts both speak of addressing the root causes of the conflict, it is in the Mindanao Peace Process as we know it now that we speak also of healing deep, social, cultural and religious cleavages.²

The qualitative difference between the Moro and Communist conflicts are also seen in their sharpest expression of armed conflict. It is the Moro conflict that has seen the biggest, bloodiest and most brutal battles over the years as well as the most barbaric, horrific, and heinous acts of war and terror from both sides. The difference is due not only to the more visceral character (as in *mujahideen* vs. crusader mode) of the Moro conflict but also to the generally different military strategy and tactics in the two armed conflicts. The (semi-)conventional or (semi-)positional warfare on the Moro front for a large part in the past – as in attacks on and defense of towns or of large rebel camps -- resulted in higher casualties and displacement among civilians, as compared to the generally sporadic encounters on the Communist front. The pattern on the Moro front has often involved periodic major military campaigns with aerial and artillery bombardment which exact a heavy toll among civilians, both because of their often indiscriminate effect and because of their causing massive internal displacement, spilling the conflict over into neighboring localities. The communist insurgency has been less willing or able to engage in positional warfare, or to maintain large fixed camps, deliberately choosing a more mobile guerrilla mode. The “collateral” loss of civilian lives from the fighting has not been as great. AFP bombardment of NPA camps in the vicinity of populated areas have also occurred but these are less frequent.³

But the AFP-NPA war, including in Mindanao, could be catching up with its own kind of intensity, on top of its already wider spread there. For one thing, there is no ceasefire in the AFP-NPA war -- unlike the official ceasefire on the Moro front with the MNLF (already with a final peace agreement) and the MILF (with unfinished peace negotiations) but not with so-called breakaway or lawless groups of both liberation fronts as well as not with the ASG. The CPP’s 40th Anniversary Statement on 26

¹ See Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo, O.M.I., “Injustice: The Root of Conflict in Mindanao” (Paper delivered before the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines in 2004).

² Formulation of Fr. Eliseo R. Mercado, Jr., O.M.I., on the two basic concerns of the Mindanao Peace Process.

³ *Philippine Human Development Report 2005: Peace, Human Security and Human Development in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Human Development Network, 2005) 6.

December 2008 speaks of a plan for a “qualitative leap” of the armed revolution, that involves the NPA advancing “from the stage of strategic defensive to that of strategic stalemate” in its three-stage protracted people’s war (PPW).⁴ The announced “overriding objective” of this new push includes “approach(ing) the goal of destroying the ruling system and replacing it with the people’s democratic state.” The plan, among others, includes a key call to “Develop the guerrilla fronts toward becoming relatively stable base areas.” Quantitatively, the NPA guerrilla fronts “must be increased to the level of 168” which “means having a guerrilla front in every congressional district in all the provinces” (note no exception even made for Moro provinces). Qualitatively, it goes “for the emergence of relatively stable base areas from the increase, merger, integration or expansion of existing guerrilla fronts under a base area command, capable of launching company-size tactical offensives on the scale of a province or several provinces, if based on an inter-provincial border area.”

The government itself already predicts or expects an “escalation of violence” by or from the NPA.⁵ But the dynamic is indeed two-sided. The AFP is still going by President Arroyo’s deadline to reduce the NPA to an “inconsequential” or “insignificant” level of a “common police problem,” no longer a “national security problem,” by 2010, or just next year.⁶ This remains very much to be seen, given four decades of the NPA’s persistence, resilience or simply staying alive.

The CPP-NPA’s nationwide politico-military presence, in terms of guerrilla fronts, is most felt in Mindanao. In the AFP’s assessment of CPP-NPA guerrilla fronts as of Yearend 2008 with a nationwide total of 62 (the CPP-NPA says that it’s about twice more), 30 are in Mindanao, 21 are in Luzon, and 11 are in the Visayas (inc. Palawan).⁷ **And so, on top of hosting the whole Moro front, Mindanao also currently hosts nearly half of the CPP-NPA guerrilla fronts nationwide.** This fact should cause us some pause to rethink what we call the Mindanao Conflict. This rethinking perhaps pertains first of all to the advocates of the Mindanao Peace Process as the main way to solve the Mindanao Conflict.

Special Significance of Mindanao to the Communist Front

Such rethinking might start with noting the special significance of Mindanao to the Communist front. CPP Founding Chairman Amado Guerrero (Jose Ma. Sison), in his classic 1974 tract “Specific Characteristics of Our People’s War,” stated that “The long-term task of our Mindanao forces is to draw enemy forces from Luzon and destroy them.

⁴ Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, “Strengthen the Party and intensify the people’s struggle in celebrating the 40th founding anniversary,” 26 December 2008 (released 24 December 2008 in the CPP-NPA-NDF website www.philippinerevolution.net).

⁵ TJ Burgonio, “Gov’t predicts ‘escalation of violence’ by NPA rebs,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 10 January 2009, p. A2.

⁶ According to Lt. Gen. Cardozo Luna, AFP Vice Chief of Staff, as cited by Jocelyn R. Uy, “Red Revolution at 40 – Sison now croons to keep cause alive (First of two parts),” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 December 2008, p. A1 & A6

⁷ Intelligence data from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

We can cooperate very well with the Moro National Liberation Front and the Bangsa Moro Army in this regard. Our forces in the Visayas can take advantage of our gains in Luzon and Mindanao and contribute their own share in the task of forcing the enemy to split his forces.”⁸ After listing the country’s 11 major islands in order of land area, with Luzon and Mindanao as Nos. 1 and 2, respectively, both in terms of land area and population, the tract then indicated a policy of “a few major islands first, then the other islands later.” It noted that “we have the widest possible space for the development of regular mobile forces in Luzon and Mindanao.” It also noted that “Mindanao is an even more mountainous and more forested island than Luzon. At the center of Mindanao are the mountainous provinces of Bukidnon and Cotabato. These are as well-populated as the mountain provinces of Northern Luzon. These are linked up with almost all of the Mindanao provinces.”

On hindsight after 35 years, things turned out not exactly as envisioned. Mindanao has become No. 1, relegating Luzon to No. 2, for the CPP-NPA-NDF in terms of guerrilla fronts nationwide. Most of the guerrilla fronts in Mindanao are not in the Bukidnon and Cotabato areas but in the Southern Mindanao (the Davao and Compostela Valley provinces) and Northeastern Mindanao (the Surigao and Agusan provinces) regions. CPP-NPA-NDF cooperation with the MNLF-BMA has been at most tactical, often coincidental, in the form of drawing enemy forces away from each other at different periods, that allowed the benefitted revolutionary force some respite and strengthening. But this cooperation did not develop to a higher form because the MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari was from the beginning most wary about association with the communist ideology and forces which are anathema to the OIC to which the MNLF depended on for diplomatic support. CPP leader Sison would later criticize Misuari for capitulating through the MNLF’s peace agreements with the GRP first in 1976 and then finally in 1996. **The CPP no longer considers the MNLF as a revolutionary force, and there been no cooperation at all between the two forces for some time now.**

Since then, the CPP-NPA-NDF has been able to develop better cooperation, in the form so far of a formal tactical alliance in 1999, with the MILF-BIAF which the former considers as a revolutionary force. Pursuant to this alliance, the CPP has reiterated its long-time policy position which has been to recognize the right to self-determination of the Bangsamoro people, including to secession *from a state of national oppression*. But the MILF would probably have reservations about the latter qualification since, in case of a future CPP-led “People’s Democratic Republic of the Philippines,” it will by definition never be “a state of national oppression” and therefore there should or would be no occasion to secede from it, contrary to MILF long-term aspirations of independence or independent Islamic statehood. **Moro nationalism of a revolutionary kind would then have to reckon with Filipino nationalism of a revolutionary kind, no longer with Filipino nationalism of a counter-revolutionary kind.**

To make a long story short, the CPP’s first attempts to set up guerrilla units and underground cells in Mindanao in the early 1970s actually ended up in fatal failure but

⁸ Amado Guerrero, “Specific Characteristics of Our People’s War” in Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (Oakland, CA, U.S.A: International Association of Filipino Patriots, 4th edition, 1979) 191.

was initially saved by two political developments: the Moro armed resistance led by the MNLF against the Marcos dictatorship and the radicalization of the Mindanao Catholic Church.⁹ **In five years (1975-80), the CPP in Mindanao had recovered to become its fastest growing organization.** So much so, that by 1980, the CPP Central Committee's Eight Plenum established the Mindanao Commission (Mindacom) to supervise island-wide revolutionary activities (actually envisioned in "Specific Characteristics").

Mindacom grew in importance as the new and vital cog in the revolutionary wheel. Its top leaders were promoted to important CPP organs. The central leadership gave Mindacom considerable latitude to experiment with strategy. This was partly in compliance with the "Specific Characteristics" policy of "centralized leadership and decentralized operations" and partly the center's acknowledgment of **Mindacom's extraordinary mobilizing capacities. But also, the very fluidity and social context of Mindanao itself as the Philippines' land frontier "filling up" made it ripe for radical expansion and experimentation.**¹⁰

In the 1980s, the CPP-NPA-NDF in Mindanao hit both its highest and lowest points. Mindanao was able to experiment with and develop more militant and effective forms of mass struggles and mobilizations, culminating in the *welgang bayan* or people's strikes, which were replicated elsewhere in the Philippines. Using this as a model and inspiration, Mindacom started contemplating, articulating and experimenting with an alteration, modification or even replacement of the existing PPW strategy with what it called a "politico-military framework" ("pol-mil"), which gave a bigger role to urban uprisings in an insurrectionary strategy. On the military front, there was increased use of NPA "armed city partisans" (urban guerrillas) in assassination and arms-gathering operations in city and town centers, and also increased "regularization" of NPA units in the countryside into "larger mobile formations" of up to battalion size to engage the AFP in bigger battles. All these forms of mass struggles and military offensives were gaining in tempo and intensity all over Mindanao – "Then Kahos erupted and changed everything."¹¹

"Kahos" was short for "Kampanyang Ahos" (literally "Garlic Campaign"), the biggest and worst of the CPP-NPA anti-infiltration/deep penetration agent (DPA) campaigns of the 1980s, resulting in the extra-judicial killing, torture and enforced disappearance of at least a thousand mostly innocent cadres, guerrillas and activists who were mostly wrongly suspected as military spies and informers. The resulting dislocation was massive – in nine months, CPP membership declined from 9,000 to 3,000 due to resignation, surrender or AWOL; the NPA was reduced from 15 or 16 companies to two, supported by 17 platoons; and the CPP-NPA lost over 50% of its mass base.¹² As the

⁹ Patricio N. Abinales, "When a Revolution Devours its Children Before Victory: *Operasyon Kampanyang Ahos* and the Tragedy of Mindanao Communism" in Patricio N. Abinales (ed.), *The Revolution Falters: The Left in Philippine Politics After 1986* (Ithaca, NY, U.S.A.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1996) 164, citing Kit Collier, "The Theoretical Problems of Insurgency in Mindanao: Why Theory? Why Mindanao?" in Mark Turner, R.J. May and Lulu Respall Turner (eds.), *Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992) 197-212.

¹⁰ Abinales, 165, 168.

¹¹ Ibid., 168-70, 177.

¹² Ibid., 156-57, citing *Ang Bayan* (the CPP official publication), March 1989, p. 6.

CPP-NPA “purges” happened not only in Mindanao but also in other regions nationwide albeit on a much lesser scale, they revealed certain internal weaknesses.

The CPP-NPA “purges” of the 1980s, the CPP central leadership’s erroneous decision to boycott the 1986 “snap” presidential election resulting in political marginalization during the EDSA I “People Power” Revolution, then its seeming disarticulation starting with its discernment of the character of the popular new Aquino administration, the start in 1988 of a big and sudden decline of the revolutionary forces in the whole country after reaching their peak armed strength in 1987, and the crisis of socialism of 1989-91, among others, were all part of the backdrop for the big split or “Great Schism” in the CPP between “reaffirmists” (RA) and “rejectionists” (RJ) of the original party line centered on the PPW strategy, which came out in the open in late 1992. The RJ factions broke away and went their own paths, some still in armed struggle, others no longer. The RAs led by Sison launched what he called the “Second Great Rectification Movement” (SGRM), especially against “urban insurrectionism” and “military adventurism” as the main deviations from the established strategy. The “reaffirmist” CPP redeployed the NPA mainly for mass work to recover the mass base. They have since been reaffirmed in this, such that from 1996 onward, the NPA strength, high-powered firearms and guerrilla fronts steadily increased, and in 1998 the CPP was confident enough to conclude its SGRM.¹³ So, it is interesting to note that, **from the “reaffirmist” CPP perspective, it was in Mindanao where the main deviations originated and manifested themselves, but it was/is also in Mindanao where the main recovery and steady increase has been made. It can be assumed that the current central leadership of the CPP must be ensuring and exercising a closer hold over its Mindanao forces.**

One of the RJ factions which broke away from the CPP was its former Central Mindanao Region (CMR) which eventually took its current form as the *Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Mindanao* (RPM-M). Actually, at least two other communist breakaway factions, but with non-Mindanao roots, also currently operate in Mindanao, namely the *Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Pilipinas* (RPM-P) and the *Marxista-Leninistang Partido ng Pilipinas* (MLPP). The CPP has been antagonistic to all of its breakaway factions, whether in or from Mindanao or elsewhere. But **the RPM-M is of particular interest to Mindanao war and peace because of its Mindanao roots. Precisely because of these roots, it has developed an indigenous tri-people analysis of and approach to Mindanao in combination with Marxist-Leninist class analysis and class basis of strategy and tactics.** This may be considered a natural or logical development as it was the former CMR which was the CPP region closest in proximity to the Moro front as well as to certain Lumad tribes.

The *tri-people framework*, which has since become widely-accepted in Mindanao, including by the GRP but not (yet) by the MILF and the CPP-NPA-NDF, emphasizes the co-existence of the three peoples which have to share Mindanao, the ideal of their equality and unity, and Mindanao itself as the basis of a new or additional entity as

¹³ See Chapter 3, “Evolution of the Armed Conflict on the Communist Front,” *Philippine Human Development Report 2005*.

Mindanaoan or *Mindanawon*. On the basis of the closely intertwined history and development of the three peoples in Mindanao, this framework would tend to seek a political solution of co-existence and shared sovereignty among the three peoples rather than of separation from each other.

RPM-M underscores the “*democratic and class contents*” of the struggle for the right to self-determination (RSD) in Mindanao, with the end in view of the “elimination of the national oppression and all other oppressions.” National oppression here refers mainly to oppression by the majority nationality (Christian settlers) of the minority nationalities (Bangsamoro and Lumad). But there are also other oppressions, mainly of the oppressed sections of both majority and minority nationalities by their respective ruling elites. These ruling elites are actually often in collaboration with each other in maintaining their respective oppressions, notably that of the Christian majority over the Bangsamoro minority and that of the Bangsamoro ruling elite over the Bangsamoro masses. The oppressed sections of both majority and minority nationalities are often pitted against each other, when in fact they have more interests in common as fellow oppressed. “Genuine and all-sided liberation” is “not just a change of one oppressor (external) to the other (internal) within the national minorities,” and should include “the liberation...also of the oppressed section of the majority nationality.” “The democratic aspirations of all nationalities (the three peoples in Mindanao) should ensure that the genuine right to self-determination of the Bangsamoro should be sustainable and can be (an) effective method and assurance that the ruling elites of all nationalities cannot use the former to perpetuate the national oppression and other forms of exploitation.”¹⁴

The RPM-M may be a small armed group compared to the CPP, MILF and MNLF, but its big ideas of an indigenous tri-people framework and of the “democratic and class contents” of the struggle for the RSD in Mindanao can be a significant contribution for the enhancement of the Mindanao Peace Process. Again, quality can be more important than quantity.

Peace Processes on the Communist Front

The Mindanao Peace Process has to take note of, if not somehow relate to, the several peace processes on the Communist front, esp. where Mindanao forces are involved. There are currently several ongoing peace processes at various stages with the CPP-NPA-NDF, the RPM-P and the RPM-M, but none with the MLPP. There are ceasefires with the RPM-P and the RPM-M, but none with the CPP-NPA-NDF and the MLPP. Of these peace processes, the most significant for purposes of this discussion are those with the CPP-NPA-NDF and with the RPM-M.

In the case of the **GRP-NDF peace process** (where the NDF represents the CPP-NPA), the nearly five-year impasse in formal peace talks since August 2004 is likely to continue till the expected mid-2010 end of term of the Arroyo administration. For the

¹⁴ Ike de los Reyes, “The Bangsamoro Question [and the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity] in the Current Situation” (manuscript, November 2008).

most part, this **has actually been more of a war front than a peace front**. The two protagonists seem to want it this way, starting with their consensus on no ceasefire, for fear of the other side taking advantage in their own respective ways. Since the GRP has ceasefire agreements with the RPM-P and the RPM-M as well as with the MILF and the MNLF, then the absence of a ceasefire with the NDF must mainly come from the latter's impetus. Aside from tactical considerations of the disadvantages of a ceasefire, *there is for the NDF the strategic consideration of its PPW strategy with armed struggle as the principal and main form of struggle – to which other forms of struggle, inc. peace negotiations, are subordinate*. There has been no strategic decision (unlike the cases of the MNLF and MILF) to give peace negotiations a real chance for a negotiated political settlement. There are only tactical objectives: international diplomatic recognition of belligerency status; propaganda; prisoner releases; and more recently to help secure the legitimacy of the CPP, NPA and Sison internationally in view of their "terrorist" listing.¹⁵ Some critics, from the Left at that, even say that CPP leader Sison, as chief political consultant of the NDF for the talks, is *fashioning protracted peace talks to be a form of struggle within the PPW*.

Be that as it may, the GRP-NDF peace negotiations on its sixth year (1998) produced its first (and so far only) substantive comprehensive agreement on human rights and international humanitarian law called the CARHRIHL¹⁶ (an agreement consistent with no ceasefire), and continues to hold the promise of socio-economic, political and constitutional reforms next on the agenda¹⁷ -- which reforms are also supposed to address the root causes of the conflict under the first of "The Six Paths to Peace" framework.¹⁸ On the other hand, the reform agenda in the peace negotiations may not progress much further without a framework or paradigm shift at the strategic level on both sides. Otherwise, **maximizing the CARHRIHL through implementation, or the framework of human rights and IHL, might be the best we can hope for in the meantime -- especially in a scenario of intensified armed conflict -- until there is some kind of breakthrough**, aside also from pursuing the reform agenda on its own merits *outside* the peace negotiations but which can still be seen as part of a broader peace process.

As has been rightly pointed out elsewhere, *humanizing the war is as crucial at this stage as finding the solution to the root causes of the rebellions*.¹⁹ **"Addressing**

¹⁵ Jose Maria Sison with Ninotchka Rosca, *Jose Maria Sison: At Home in the World: Portrait of a Revolutionary* (Greensboro, North Carolina: Open Hand Publishing, LLC, 2004) 97, 101, 140, 177, 204-06.

¹⁶ *Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines* dated 16 March 1998, popularly known as the CARHRIHL.

¹⁷ Government of the Republic of the Philippines and National Democratic Front of the Philippines, *Joint Declaration*, 1 September 1992, The Hague, The Netherlands., particularly paragraph 5(b).

¹⁸ As institutionalized in Executive Order (EO) No. 125 of President Ramos dated 15 September 1993 and EO No. 3 of President Arroyo dated 28 February 2001, which both deal with the approach/policy and (administrative) structure for government's comprehensive peace process/efforts.

¹⁹ This insight is attributed to Protestant Bishop Constante Claro of the United Churches of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), as mentioned by Davao lawyer Carlos Isagani T. Zarate, "Mirage," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 January 2009, p. A15.

concerns arising from the continuing armed hostilities” is, after all, the fifth of “The Six Paths to Peace.” Unfortunately, not only are the root causes of the armed conflict not being addressed because of dormant peace negotiations but the war is also being dehumanized by continuing serious violations of human rights and IHL – actually on both the Communist and Moro fronts. But these violations, which partake of oppression, injustice and indignity, are actually also part of the root causes. And so, the vicious cycle of conflict-insecurity-further conflict goes on – protractedly – unless certain paradigms or mindsets change for the better on both sides.²⁰

“The other peace process” with the RPM-M, though small, deserves due attention as a source of hope. It has been called “the other peace process” because it represents a small rebel group and peace process compared to the big or major rebel groups and peace processes like with the NDF, MILF and MNLF, and because of its *radically different approach from that of the big top-level peace negotiations* in most cases. It does not (so far) involve complex peace negotiations. Rather, a local peace and development agenda that will have an immediate impact on the ground will be formulated by the concerned communities and tribes in Mindanao through participatory local consultations to identify problems and needs as well as responses there which could take the form of projects. Such empowered and sustainable communities are the real foundation of peace. The process itself will allow these communities to win small victories and build peace by themselves. The final political settlement is important but the communities need not wait for this. Building peace for them is here and now. This community-level process continues to be pursued independent of the panel-level talks and despite the latter’s delay. Still, the RPM-M peace process is also getting back on the latter track which is still needed for a final resolution to the conflict.²¹

If there is a need for models of authentic dialogue with the communities, here is one in Mindanao which also has the merit of upholding the equal importance of peace negotiations with rebel groups. There is a potential here for developing an effective combination of public consultations and peace negotiations, pursuant to the relatively new strategy of public participation in peacemaking. The RPM-M articulates this in this way: “A community-based and people-centered peace negotiation among revolutionary groups with the government should be an insurance for achieving a sustained and genuine political settlement... The people should be seen as active participants and the principal stakeholders in any political settlement between the revolutionary groups and the government.... And hence, the participation of the masses and the corresponding development of the political consciousness in all levels (and in all stages) of the peace process would ensure the substantive democratic content...”²²

²⁰ See *Philippine Human Development Report*, esp. pp. 32-34, 51 & 96.

²¹ Kaloy Manlupig, “GRP-RPM-M: The Other Peace Process,” accessible at www.balaymindanaw.org/bmfi/essays/2004/grp-rpmm.html. Manlupig heads the NGO Balay Mindanaw which serves as the independent secretariat for the talks, another unconventional feature of this process.

²² Ike de los Reyes, “The Bangsamoro Question [and the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity] in the Current Situation” (manuscript, November 2008).

Active and even direct participation of the people and communities in the peace process does not make the rebel/revolutionary groups superfluous because the latter, as the RPM-M says, are also “included as among the legitimate stakeholders” and should not be isolated from their respective mass bases or constituencies.²³ In addition, there is the pertinent analysis and approaches that these groups may contribute to the mutual problem-solving that is of the essence of peace negotiations. In the case of the RPM-M, it has adopted a multi-form struggle but gives paramount importance to peace-building and development work at this time because of the adverse effect of the war situation on the tri-peoples of Mindanao. **At some point too, a convergence must be found among the several peace processes relevant to Mindanao, starting of course with those involving the MILF and the MNLF, but eventually co-relating on common aspects with the peace processes on the Communist front** – whether on the minimum matter of “addressing concerns arising from the continuing armed hostilities” or on more substantive issues like the Lumad Question.

Tug of War for the Lumad

As the most marginalized and minoritized among the three peoples in Mindanao, the Lumad are the ones most caught in the middle (sometimes crossfire) of this or that tug of war. There is, on one hand, what the MOA-AD controversy brought out as the **political tug of war between the GRP and the MILF for the allegiance of the Lumad**. This involved no less than the very identity of the Lumad whom the MILF (and the MNLF before them) claimed as part of the Bangsamoro but which most Lumad refused to be subsumed into. To the Lumad, this was a matter of *political* life-and-death. Then, there is also, on the other hand, the often *real* life-and-death matter of the **military tug of war between the AFP and the NPA for able-bodied recruits from the Lumad** – with the worst case scenario of Lumad killing Lumad. **This too has become part of the Mindanao Conflict.**

In the 2003 Mission to the Philippines Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the indigenous people,²⁴ there is a section on “Militarization and Human Rights” (paras. 44-53). It states that some indigenous regions have suffered the impact of the communist insurgency as well as governmental counter-insurgency measures. The Special Rapporteur received reports of arbitrary detentions, persecution and even killings of community representatives, of mass evacuations, hostage-taking, destruction of property, summary executions, forced disappearances, coercion, and also of rape by armed forces, the police or so-called paramilitaries. Special mention was made of CAFGUs set up by the army in numerous

²³ RPMM Peace Committee, “Position Paper of the RPMM-RPA on the Demobilization, Disarmament, Reintegration/Rehabilitation Framework of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines vis-à-vis Peace Talks” (6 September 2008).

²⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the indigenous people, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/65, Addendum: MISSION TO THE PHILIPPINES (5 March 2003).

indigenous municipalities, whose semi-military activities often tend to divide local communities and set one group against another. The practice of “hamletting” whereby the military force indigenous peoples to congregate in specified locations against their will and restrict their free movement by imposing a curfew, constitutes another serious human rights (and IHL) violation. The highest government authorities and the communities themselves assured the Special Rapporteur that indigenous peoples are essentially peaceful and not involved in any kind of subversive or insurgent activities. And yet, they may stand accused of terrorism or rebellion. Human rights (and IHL) violations against indigenous communities are also committed at times by rebel groups and private armies. The Special Rapporteur called on all parties to the conflict, particularly the government, to fully respect the provisions of IHL concerning the rights of civilians in armed conflict. Among his recommendations were that CAFGUs be withdrawn from indigenous areas altogether, within the framework of a national program to demilitarize indigenous peoples’ territories, and that the government take maximum caution to protect indigenous peoples’ rights during its military operations, in accordance with international humanitarian standards.

For the most part, the Lumad have not resorted to armed struggle for self-determination, as have the Bangsamoro, but there have been some recent exceptions such as the Indigenous People’s Federal Army (IPFA) and the Bungkatol Liberation Army (BLA). Such Lumad armed groups have not, however, reached the scale and lifespan of the Cordillera People’s Liberation Army (CPLA) of the Cordillera ethnic region in Northern Philippines, the prime example of an indigenous highlander rebel group in the Philippines and actually the first major breakaway from the CPP-NPA as early as 1986, well before the big split.

Other Lumad armed groups, both pro-state and anti-state, are thought to exist, but these have generally remained obscure. One pro-state (unlike the anti-state IPFA and BLA) Lumad armed group which has caught the notice of a UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples is the LUPACA-Bagani Warriors set up by the Philippine military in the Caraga (Northeastern Mindanao) region to fight the NPA there. The group has staged fake NPA “surrenders” in an effort to gain public support.²⁵ Recently, a Lumad militia belonging to the Dibabawon tribe was reported to have accompanied elements of the Philippine Army’s 28th Infantry Battalion during raids on houses in a tribal village near the site of an NPA ambush in Compostela Valley province in Mindanao.²⁶

In the greater Davao area or Southern Mindanao region, the majority of NPA rebels are said to be Lumad. In Davao City, three NPA front committees and an NPA mobile regional guerrilla unit have about 70-80% Lumad belonging to the Ata and Matigsalog tribes. By late 2001, a state-inspired counter-force called “Lihuk Lumad (Alsa Lumad) Movement” with its own “Bahani Warriors” emerged, aside from the formation of Lumad CAFGU companies. This Movement has involved setting up effective village defense systems on strategic Lumad communities to deny the NPA

²⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁶ Tupas, Jeffrey M., “Tribal tillers fear being in military’s enemies list,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 29 January 2007, p. A4.

freedom of movement, thereby blocking their operations. In effect, there has been an almost literal tug of war between pro-state and anti-state forces for the Lumad mass base. There is also an attempt by both forces to tap into the strong warrior rank and culture among Lumad in the area.²⁷

The overall trend is still towards the recruitment of Lumad warriors into the various state and non-state armed forces operating in Mindanao, not always in the service of Lumad interests. But in recent years, there has been the formation of separate, autonomous Lumad armed groups that are non-aligned with either the AFP or the NPA. In some cases, they have taken the form of Lumad “territorial defense forces” to preempt any recruitment of their warriors by the AFP and the NPA. **One wonders though whether a time will come when such indigenous and tradition-based armed strength will be needed also to assert the Lumad’s own right to self-determination or to have a louder voice in the peace process. Before it gets to that, effective vehicles, forums or mechanisms for the Lumad agenda have to be developed, whether within or parallel to the already existing and ongoing peace processes on both the Communist and Moro fronts.**

Peace Advocacy and Constituency-Building on Two Fronts

Finally, we come to the motive forces, the peace movements on the two fronts. These movements have admittedly lost some ground in peace constituency-building because of past and current failures or loss of momentum in peace negotiations, agreements and implementation, more so on the Communist front than on the Moro front. Public interest in and support for the GRP-NDF peace negotiations has been much on the wane for quite some time already because of perceived lack of sincerity and of long suspensions. The peace constituency for the Mindanao peace process is in somewhat better shape but the Mindanao peace movement still has its weaknesses, as shown by the MOA-AD controversy.

Be that as it may, **the various groups, individuals and networks of Mindanao peace advocates and their activities are one of the bright spots and sources of hope for the Mindanao peace process.**²⁸ **The Mindanao peace movement is actually**

²⁷ Emmanuel A. Mahipus, *Empowerment of the Lumads in Critical Areas of Southern Mindanao and its Effects on Insurgency* (Master in National Security Administration thesis, National Defense College of the Philippines, 2003) 51-54.

²⁸ There is growing related literature on this Mindanao peace work. There is at least one book, just on Mindanao peace advocacy: Karl M. Gaspar CSsR, Elpidio A. Lapad, and Ailynne J. Maravillas, *Mapagpakalinawon: A Reader for the Mindanawon Peace Advocate* (Davao City: Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao, Inc. and Catholic Relief Services/Philippines, 2002). See also Steven Rood, “Civil Society and Conflict Management” (Paper prepared for the “The Dynamics and Management of Internal Conflicts in Asia” Third Study Group Meeting, February 27-March 3, 2004, Washington, D.C.); Carolyn O. Arguillas, “Enlarging spaces and strengthening voices for peace: civil society initiatives in Mindanao” in *Accord Update Issue 6* (2003), *The Mindanao peace process*, A supplement to *Compromising on autonomy*, 12-16; and Initiatives for International Dialogue, *Peacebuilder’s Kit for Mindanao: Working for a Peaceful Mindanao* (Davao City: Initiatives for International Dialogue, 2002).

showing the way for the national peace movement. Below the relatively quiet surface of the peace constituency are the increasingly active efforts at peace advocacy, peace education, peace research, relief for evacuees, rehabilitation and development, interfaith dialogue, reconciliation and healing, women in peace-building, culture of peace, peace zone-building and other community-based peace initiatives.²⁹ Peace workers have indeed acted locally, and usually more effectively at that than when acting nationally. Their separate but interrelated and collective efforts at various levels, in various peace fronts, **are a source of hope that eventually a critical mass consolidated into a strengthened peace movement will turn the tide in favor of peace.** By 2003, seven peace networks came together to form a coalition called Mindanao Peaceweavers: the Agung Network, Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF), Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS), Mindanao Peace Advocates' Conference (MPAC), Mindanao Peoples' Caucus (MPC), Mindanao People's Peace Movement (MPPM), Mindanao Solidarity Network (MSN), and Peace Advocates Zamboanga (PAZ).

The work of the MPC and its "Bantay Ceasefire" in engaging or "accompanying" the GRP-MILF peace negotiations and the ceasefire has also served as a model for similar initiatives on the Communist front which includes Mindanao. In particular, it inspired the independent citizen network called "Sulong CARHRIHL" to monitor and promote that human rights and IHL agreement in support of the broader GRP-NDF peace process. "Sulong CARHRIHL" is currently the only sustained civil society effort of promoting this peace process and which has local partners nationwide, inc. in Mindanao. But it needs so much more partners for peace work on the Communist front where the peace constituency is still very weak.

I would therefore now pose the challenge to the Mindanao peace movement and advocates, esp. in the majority Christian areas, to take up the cause of the peace process also on the Communist front since this affects an already bigger part of Mindanao. In this way, the Mindanao peace movement would greatly help build the much-needed peace movement and constituency on that other front. Perhaps, there can be analogy here with the special significance and main contribution of Mindanao and Mindanao forces to the Communist front of war. But this time, let it be on the peace front. It is conventional wisdom not to wage war on two fronts. As it is, the AFP has long been waging war on two fronts in Mindanao. But it was only two years ago, that its Southern Command divided itself into two new commands to each focus on those two fronts of Western Mindanao and Eastern Mindanao. Might the Mindanao peace movement not also have its Western and Eastern Mindanao "commands"? Peace must be waged on all fronts where it is needed. Might that not be too much to handle? Maybe, *but if any body can do it, Mindanao can, with its proven dynamism.*

²⁹ One good, more recent survey, with case studies, as well as discussion of the obstacles and opportunities of civil society peacebuilding work in Mindanao is Ayesah Uy Abubakar, "Challenges of Peacebuilding in the GRP-MILF Peace Process" in Kamarulzaman Askandar (ed.), *Building Peace: Reflections from Southeast Asia* (Penang, Malaysia: Southeast Asia Conflict Studies Network, 2007) 205-30.

All-told, there is need for a strategy of peace constituency/movement building at the Mindanao and national levels. UNDP peace consultant Dr. Paul Oquist once spoke in 2002 of the need for a “broad-based alliance for peace, human rights and democracy in Mindanao” but also a “national movement that provides the social base and political support necessary to construct peace in the short, medium and long terms” and a “vigorous civil society presence in the form of a peace movement that articulates the consolidation of various citizens’ peace initiatives.”³⁰ He described this task as “probably medium-term.” Incidentally, in his UNDP Fifth Mission Assessment Report of 2002, he also started to note that “The peace process with the CPP-NPA-NDF must also be factored into the construction of peace [in Mindanao].” Though, as we had discussed, it actually may be the armed conflict with the CPP-NPA-NDF that should be factored in even more.

“Probably medium-term” is a good time frame of mind for the peace movement to be guided by a *strategic orientation and its own road map* to enable it to be more proactive. This strategic peace movement, with a “high-level Peace Council of notable citizens” as possible rallying point, is basically the critical mass needed to make the institutional peace-building policy position politically and operationally feasible. The Mindanao peace movement *cannot be insular*; it too must link to a national movement and have allies in “Imperial Manila” because “the powers to decide on war rests in Metro Manila with people who have not, and will not feel the consequences of their decisions.”³¹ In fact, the whole Philippine peace movement *cannot be insular*. It must relate to international and regional (Southeast Asian) developments and initiatives in the spirit of learning from and helping each other.

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³⁰ Dr. Paul Oquist, “Mindanao and Beyond: Competing Policies, Protracted Peace Process and Human Security” (23 October 2002) 12-13. He has been UNDP Senior Regional Governance Adviser for Asia and Coordinator, UNDP Paragon Regional Governance Programme for Asia. A major part of his analysis on the Mindanao Peace Process is a result of a series of assessment missions undertaken jointly with Alma R. Evangelista, UNDP Philippines Peace and Development Advisor.

³¹ Carolyn O. Arguillas, “Enlarging spaces and strengthening voices for peace: civil society initiatives in Mindanao” in *Accord Update* Issue 6 (2003), *The Mindanao peace process*, A supplement to *Compromising on autonomy*, 16.