

Local Communities Push for Peace Zones

Peace-building efforts by communities are becoming increasingly important as the army and MILF renew hostilities.

When the military and Moro rebels clashed outside their home in Dungguan, North Cotabato, Mudzaim Habib, then seven-year-old, was in the bath. He escaped the exchange of gun fires in dripping wet clothes. His mother, two sisters, and three brothers only stopped long enough to grab a cooking pan and a small sack of rice before fleeing.

It was four years and stay in four evacuation centres later before Habib's family finally returned to Dungguan. But a family feud (or rido) forced them to decamp again. When his mother proposed moving to Kapatagan, Lanao del Sur, Habib asked, "What about my studies?" His mother replied, "If you were diligent here, you should be diligent there too."

Habib, now 18 and a high school graduate, says it was his direct experience in fleeing conflicts that turned him into a community youth leader in Kapatagan actively working for peace.

Efforts by communities and individuals to promote peace are becoming increasingly important as the Philippine army and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, are back fighting again two months after a scheduled peace agreement collapsed.

The crisis since the government pulled out of the scheduled Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, MOA-AD, in early August has so far cost the lives of hundreds; displaced more than half a million people from nine provinces, and damaged property worth 121.5 million Philippine pesos (2.6 million US dollars), according to the National Disaster Coordinating Council.

Meantime assistance from the government, non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies and other international groups has been put at 91 million PhP (2 million US dollars).

But if peace is to be achieved, Kapatagan mayor Raida Maglangit says it is not enough to simply talk about it or believe in it, "Everyone must work for it"

Following the last war in Mindanao, Kapatagan was designated a "peace zone" after the local government, military, MILF, sectoral leaders, and peace advocates signed a local security agreement.

The town, strategically located at the southern tip of Lanao del Sur, had been devastated by the all-out war in 2000 that displaced nearly a million villagers in Mindanao.

Peace zones are people-initiated, community-based responses to armed conflict, contributing to build a constituency for stability and security at the barangay (village) level.

To strengthen peace, local leaders pushed community dialogues and consultations and created a committee to settle rido cases which have long been a disfiguring feature of Mindanao life.

The peace efforts paid off. Government and NGOs helped provide infrastructure, like roads and buildings and basic services – projects that were sorely lacking in this former no man’s land.

Maglangit says it was difficult at first for people to put the guns aside and keep the peace. “But when they saw that many investments were coming in nobody complained anymore,” she said.

It was this peace that encouraged Habib’s family to move to Kapatagan. “Since moving here, we have a real peace of mind,” he said.

The idea of peace zones has been attributed to the people of Hungduan in the Cordilleras in northern Philippines, according to the Gaston Z Ortigas Peace Institute. The people in Hungduan had succeeded in getting the communist New People’s Army to withdraw their forces, so preventing the military from moving in.

In September 1986, the first Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, ZOPFAN, was declared in Naga City in southern Luzon. Since then, community-based and people-initiated peace efforts have gained ground around the country.

Grassroots peace-building is like building anything, according to Father Roberto Layson, former parish priest of Pikit, North Cotabato and now coordinator of the Oblates of Mary Immaculates’ Inter-Religious Dialogue based in Pikit.

“You don’t build from the top down but from bottom up. In Pikit, we continue to plant the seed of goodness not even knowing if and when it is going to grow,” he said.

Every time fighting erupts in central Mindanao, the Pikit parish church becomes the refuge of hundreds of displaced Muslim and Christian evacuees.

In Carmen, North Cotabato, a local group of Muslims and Christians have formed a task force to help the local government settle conflicts without violence. One of task force’s members, Bobby Tacuken, says clashes between Muslims and Christians began way back in the years of martial law. He admits he feared and even hated Christians back then and began to carry a gun.

Tacuken’s family was displaced during the all-out war between the military and the MILF in 2000. The effect to their community was so massive that Tacuken’s family and other evacuees had to stay in evacuation centres for two years.

“When we returned, we found the same Muslims and Christians also returned. We realised we were all affected,” he said.

As a symbol of peace, the task force planted bamboos at the site of the former battleground between Muslims and Christians.

Conflict-affected areas are “divided, fractured communities influenced by conflicting groups”, says Pablo Rey Pio Fuentes, programme manager of PEACEPATHS. A programme of the Assisi Development Foundation, PEACEPATHS seeks to build peace and rehabilitate conflict-affected communities in Cotabato, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur.

“The communities need to understand the causes of conflict,” said Fuentes. At a recent peace-building dialogue in Davao City, he discussed the causes: massive and abject poverty and economic inequity; poor governance; injustice, abuse of power and violation of human rights; structural inequities in the political system; and exploitation and marginalisation of indigenous cultural communities.

“The most important task in conflict-affected areas is the process of raising awareness around what conflict is about so the community can respond properly. Dialogues and trainings are part of the process but these have to be specific and targeted to meet particular needs,” said Fuentes.

In Mindanao, peace zones have been declared in Cotabato, Maguindanao, and early this year in Jolo, Sulu. The Jolo Zone of Peace declaration prohibits carrying of firearms and seeks to minimise military presence. The authorities have also clamped down hard on illegal gambling, drug trade and other crimes that help precipitate conflict.

But the secret, says Fuentes, is real and sustained action and not simply warm words and declarations.

“Communities must defend and preserve their zones of peace. They must be credible, solve their own problems, and assert the declaration of peace,” he said. “Important factors are, how much can they assert? How much can other groups supporting the peace zone protect the community and sanction violators?”

Tacuken of the Carmen task force believes communities can do much – but not everything. “The community,” he said, “can work to rebuild peace, but the government and MILF must solve their problems first. We are all affected. That’s why the leaders must come to an agreement.”

As people talked on the possible resurgence of fighting with the recent end of Ramadan, Tacuken raises concern on achieving peace. “Peace will take a long time to achieve,” he said. “Even though many of us share the same goal, everybody has different opinions how to get there.”

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