

**Conference Session 3.3: Conflict Resolution – Post-conflict  
Post Conflict Healing of Psychological Trauma Caused by Violent Conflict in Mindanao  
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I wish to express my pleasure and delight in joining all of you today in this International Conference on the theme “Best Practices on Inter-religious Dialogue “. I also wish to congratulate the organizers for conducting this conference and for promoting dialogue in their agenda. I welcome you too, the participants for spending your valuable time in this dialogue. Many high level theories often take our world to be a collection of religions or of cultures..... Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, People from the West or East. But one global thinker, *Amartya Sen*, in his critique of Huntington’s’ thesis on “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the world Order” asserts that this unique partitioning of the world based on civilizational lines is ‘severely challenged’ and can lead to global confrontation if we ignore the pluralities of identities that people have and value, such as, race, class, gender, profession, language, and politics. These diverse classifications that shape our identities determine the way we relate with people and the degree of cohesion or alienation within communities in the larger society that we actually live.

But history attests and indeed we have witnessed that the politics of global conflict, misguided as it is, is often seen as ‘corollary of religious or cultural divisions’ in the world. Let me cite the situation in the Philippines.

Ninety per cent of the population in the Philippines is predominantly Christian with a minority population of 5% Muslims and animists known as indigenous people or *Lumads*, and these minority groups are mainly clustered in Mindanao, the Southern part of the country. In comparison with non-Christians, the Christians in the Philippines are advantaged in government policy alienating the minority groups. Ethnically too the Philippine Muslims are more related to the inhabitants of Sabah, Malaysia, which in all circumstance, gives them a feeling of being foreign in their own country the Philippines.

Ninety per cent ( 90%) of the Muslim population itself is divided into 4 major ethnolinguistic groups: the Maguindanao, Maranao-Ilanun, Tausug and Samal . And this communitarian division brought about by their ‘*ethnie*’ fosters that feeling of foreignness by people in the excluded group which is a source of disunity among the Muslims themselves. In this case ethnic identity, with shared values and culture, peerless and paramount, is a critical component of collective cohesion which identifies a “we” and which is mobilized against a definable “they” or ‘the other’ to achieve certain social goals.

Mindanao has been besieged by internal armed conflict because of the confluence of three factors: 1) the desire of the Bangsa Moro People (the Muslims of Mindanao) for self determination and their claim on ancestral domain 2)clan wars known as “rido” triggered by ‘land disputes, long-standing vendettas and political and economic rivalries’ among the Muslim families themselves, and 3) the counterinsurgency operations against both the AbbuSayyaff an international terrorist group notorious for kidnapping and other lawless activities in the island provinces of Basilan, Zulu and Zamboanga, and the communist rebel group New People’s Army

active throughout the country. Very recently, another factor came into the picture, that is, the claim of the Sultan of Sulu for ancestral domain in the territories of Sabah.

The Muslims are negotiating a peace settlement with the government for self-determination. The peace process was recently concluded with the signing of a framework agreement recognizing the Bangsamoro as a political entity . Prior to the signing, the war between the Government armed forces and the Muslim Rebels has raged for almost four decades with 3 major conflicts erupting in 2000, 2003 and 2008 causing the death of 120,000 and the displacement of 410,000 men, women and children in Mindanao. As of March 2011, at least 20,000 more people have been displaced in Central Mindanao by Rido and fighting between rival rebel commanders. The Maguindanao Massacre in November 2010 which saw 58 people dead is a high profile example of 'rido' related violence.

### **Women issues in conflict areas**

The trauma of the on-going conflict raging in Mindanao runs very deep. The insurgency and clan wars have left thousands of families homeless and displaced. The National disaster Coordinating Council reports that more than 300,000 people remain displaced because of the fighting. The refugees are housed in school buildings and "tent cities" in the provinces of Central and Western Mindanao. Their suffering is beyond imagination. They languish in deplorable conditions of health and sanitation. In such situations, women and children are the helpless victims. Displaced women in refugee centers face increased health risks, poor sanitation, protection issues, including increased risk of sexual violence, and loss of livelihood. Furthermore, in post conflict situations unscrupulous people take advantage of the displacement of families and the consequent poverty brought about by the conflict targeting young girls who easily fall prey to illegal recruiters for overseas jobs and human trafficking.

The needs and vulnerabilities of women affected by conflict are serious, their situation remains fragile and the psychological effects of the conflict on women and children are unimaginable.

### **Healing and Reconciliation: A Religions for Peace initiative**

Religions for Peace, Philippines strategic response to the conflict areas of Mindanao lies in fostering reconciliation by providing a capacity building program on mental health and trauma healing to three sectors affected by the conflict: 1) community women volunteers; 2) the internally displaced youth; and 3) the Military personnel of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of Central Mindanao. This capacity building was made possible with the help of the volunteers of the Psychotrauma Clinic of the University of Santo Tomas.

Our initial engagement in Mindanao was with the Women community leaders facilitated by the Catholic Parish Priest of 'Pikit' and a member of the Congregation Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Religious encounter with the women community leaders in the informal sector who themselves are victims and witnesses of the conflict in Mindanao gave us a deeper insight and a more realistic information into the needs and situation of the grassroots in conflict areas. We saw the need for healing of the multiple traumas experienced by the internally displaced persons in conflict areas as a result of the continued fighting between warring groups. We chose to train the women because in times of conflict, the women of Central Mindanao play key roles in conflict transformation by holding the family together with some becoming the sole provider of the family while the men are fighting. They are also effective mediators between warring clans and

are powerful peace advocates. Because of their life enhancing spirituality that values women's experience of birthing, nurturing, healing and educating, they understand what it means to suffer not only of their own pain but also the pain of others. They worry that the on-going conflict and the trauma inflicted on the families may affect the formation of their children thereby producing a generation that espouses violence as a way of life instead of cherishing love, peace and justice. In order to ensure the sustainability of the program, RfP organized the women volunteers who were trained on trauma healing into the **“Central Mindanao Women of Faith Network”**. Some of the women in the network are already involved in grassroots activities helping women overseas workers often illegally recruited. The women applied their newly acquired debriefing skills by helping facilitate counseling sessions that we provided to youth and children victims of trauma in their communities and in refugee centers. Many of these children are victims not only of the conflict but also of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Some of these children are being recruited as child soldiers. The children and youth caught in conflict situations told stories of their fears, of violence, despair and hatred for the military man in uniform.

The children's storytelling was a deeply moving experience and this led Religions for Peace to reach out to the Military and with the help of our Muslim collaborator from the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines we were successful in building the capacity of the Military (6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division with 7,000 military personnel based in Maguindanao) on psychosocial support and critical incidence stress debriefing. The training of the Military, which was the first in the country at the Division level, is essential to the men and women in uniform assigned in conflict areas as it would help them in minimizing the impact of the psychological trauma from combat situations, and to mitigate the risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from shell shock, a condition that oftentimes trigger violent behavior and mental disorder. It is ironic that such psychosocial support for the armed forces is not in place in the system. It is very important that the men and women of the military be able to take care of themselves because they are not only soldiers but human beings vulnerable to the effects of the conflict as well. It is heartwarming to note the changing paradigm in the Military where the trained Army personnel use their newly acquired psychosocial skills in their peace-building activities to civilian communities especially those internally displaced in the conflict affected areas. We believe that the way to promote a culture of peace in the security sector is to build the capability of the men and women in uniform on peace-building activities, for them to become builders and developers rather than occupational forces.

It is our thesis that there can never be any fruitful dialogue for peace in Mindanao unless and until the psychological wounds wrought by the conflict are healed as part of the post-conflict rehabilitation process. The training aimed to empower the community women volunteers, the youth and Military personnel to do their share in peace building and healing by healing their own psychological wounds and equipping them with the necessary skills and competencies in mental health and as para-debriefers especially in emergency situations. The encounter was also a means of providing the landscape for personal healing and reconciliation, key ingredients towards achieving inner peace and an attitude of dialogue among some of the stakeholders in Mindanao.

### **Engendering a climate of dialogue**

By building the capacity for psychological support to victims of conflict in Central Mindanao without discriminating victims on either side of the warring groups, we earned the trust and goodwill of the people in the communities including the leadership of both the rebel groups, the

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the military. This paved the way for exploratory talks on advancing the role of multi-religious communities in the peace process. It is the position of RfP that the cooperation and active involvement of the multi-religious communities can contribute to a lasting sustainable peace in Mindanao. The non-political involvement and extensive influence of multi-religious communities in the national and international arena and grassroots levels can provide an effective mechanism in facilitating peace and development at various levels of action. With this understanding, Religions for Peace was able to conduct dialogues with the leadership of the MILF and key government officials involved to advance the cause for the protection of women and children.

### **Building Partnerships**

Seeking and establishing partnerships at local, national and regional and international levels is essential to achieve ethical, practical and statutory activity for the long-term engagement and sustainability of peace-building processes. Through Consultation meetings and Inter-religious Forums which are often issue based such as Climate Change, Violence against women, child protection, migration, etc, RfP is strengthening its links with other faith based organizations such as the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, the Bishop Ulama Conference, the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines, and the Focolare, the University of Santo Tomas, Silsillah and parishes involved in IRD. RfP is also strengthening its links with inter-governmental agencies and organizations such as the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos, the Office of the President for Special Concerns, and the Office of the President for Communications & Operations. The support of FBO and Government agencies is essential in attracting resources and in promoting the cause of RfP. At the international level, Religions for Peace Philippines is intricately linked with Religions for Peace International, the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace and UNICEF. To some extent the work of Religions for Peace Philippines in Mindanao is becoming a global benchmark on grassroots approach to peacebuilding and post-conflict transformation.

### **Faith in Action**

The men and women behind Religions for Peace Philippines work with a strong sense of voluntarism. They work to be of service to others and work without expectation of reward. The women whether Muslim or Christian see their involvement in peacebuilding activities as an expression of their Faith in Action. Faith provides the moral lens for prompting them into action and signals to others a commitment to shared values. Faith-based organizations such as RfP espouse civically relevant values such as compassion, forgiveness, justice, altruism and respect for larger than life issues values that help them internalize an orientation to the common good. They draw inspiration from the magnanimity of their religious teachings that universally dwell on peace, fellowship and love of neighbor. They nurture community work grounded on love and unity thus building their stock of social capital enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. And because Faith has the power to transform lives Religions for Peace programs can enjoy success where secular programs can fail.

## **Conclusion**

From the work of Religions for Peace Philippines one can conclude that grassroots and peace building activities is context specific in that it is focused on the violence inherent in the Mindanao conflict and the oftentimes mis-labeled deep-seated prejudices between Christians and Muslims. Any successes achieved by the men and women behind RfP lie in the strength of their faith where love as a universal value is deeply rooted in their religious traditions, and in their desire to put their faith into practice. Though they work with the spirit of voluntarism, their peace-building activities are strongly supported by structured faith based organizations/institutions with the capability of mobilizing and securing resources and in training and building capacity for peace advocacy. The work involves personal and organizational accountability and is oriented toward processes such as reconciliation and healing through peace advocacy, peace facilitation, capacity building and people empowerment. The task of building peace is firmly anchored on their faith and in a vision where they see the unity of man in peace, because peace is attainable, sustainable and certainly desirable.

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## **Interviews:**

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