PERSPECTIVES

Will Addressing the Socioeconomic Concerns of the Mindanao People Put an End to Conflict in Southern Philippines?

✳ ✳ ✳ ✳ ✳

Addressing socioeconomic concern without putting up appropriate political structure for Muslim Mindanao is like pouring water into a bottomless container. The proposition, *Will addressing the socioeconomic concerns of the Mindanao people put an end to conflict in southern Philippines?* raises a timely question. It poses a pungent inquiry on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of such an overly trumpeted approach by the government. It also evokes what may be termed as "Mindanao fatigue" considering that despite all the approaches (e.g., militarization, peace negotiation, social service, economic development) pursued in Mindanao for the past several decades, conflict has remained and continued to spark every now and then. This question should have been raised a few years ago as many people are wondering why the Mindanao conflict persists despite huge amount of economic assistance and development poured to Mindanao since the 1970s. Recently, questions must also be asked as to what happened to the financial support and development assistance extended by countries in the Arab world, Europe and the United States including assistance from international multidonor agencies.

It is sheer folly to believe that the *main* solution to end the Mindanao conflict is simply addressing the socioeconomic concerns of people in southern Philippines. If addressing such concerns is enough to solve the problem, the Mindanao conflict would have not escalated and would have been ended forty or thirty years ago. The government

had been engaged in social and economic development in Mindanao since the Philippine independence in 1946 and even before. And it is precisely this claim that begs an answer: why does socioeconomic assistance fail to end the Mindanao conflict? After several years of attempt to put off the issue, it is clear that mere socioeconomic assistance is unable to resolve the problem. In fact, due to overdependence by the Philipine government on economic intervention and assistance from foreign countries and international funding agencies, it gets entangled in gargantuan debt and enormous financial obligations with the international community. It now appears that reliance on foreign assistance has become another culprit, the source of problem instead of solution. Political instability, war, lawlessness, warlordism, graft and corruption and a host of other problems brought about by the conflict have turned most of economic intervention and development assistance into insignificance and waste.

Not only has the conflict persisted after many years of using Mindanao as a pretext in the Philippine government's international beggary, the conflict has, in all indications, elevated without any sign of a permanent resolution. The peace process has simply become a mechanism of moderating one rebel group only to radicalize another group. The tenacity of Moro struggle and the resilience of rebels have practically exhausted the resources of the government. After relentless years of appeasing and coopting rebels, it is shown that the secessionist appetite is insatiable by "peace and development" even as Muslim areas are further thrown into the tail end of practically all social and economic indicators as shown by the Human Development Index and statistical data coming from credible and independent polling institutions in the country and abroad. Ironically, as Muslim areas languished in maldevelopment, non-Muslim areas that are far from war zone are the ones developing in great speed.

This view does not mean that socioeconomic intervention is not important. What it implies is that addressing socioeconomic concerns are not enough to end the Mindanao conflict. There must be more urgent requirements for such social and economic intervention to be effective and to serve its purpose. Instead of simply implementing social and economic development and poverty alleviation programs, the most critical requirement is to create a credible political structure that would serve as the primary institution to supervise, oversee, coordinate and calibrate socioeconomic programs and development projects in Mindanao. It is viewing the Mindanao conflict from broader and deeper perspective.

Like in the past, the present set-up of Mindanao autonomy, including other administrative tiers and offices intended for self-governance and development especially for the Moros, do not represent a viable political structure. It is plagued by problems dictated by the country's unitary structure, which practically defines all tiers from the national level down to the lowest level.

The Philippine unitary structure does not fit with the country's cultural heterogeneity in areas such as language, nationality, religion, and so on. Not even *ad hoc* offices for Mindanao under the Office of the President are capable in filling in the void. Socioeconomic finances, programs and projects that are coursed through such defective structure are expected to meet graft and corruption, and bureaucratic hurdles among others. This is the reason why despite the existence of autonomous government in Mindanao since the 1970s, the standard of living of Moros and level of economic development failed to change substantially. In fact, they worsened since then. Social intervention and economic development void with the question of political structure is fraught with fallacy and represents a misunderstanding of Mindanao conflict. It must be noted that the Mindanao conflict is primarily a political contention between the Philippine government and the Moro rebels, although we acknowledge that there are other subsidiary issues that underpinned it. The notion of political contention—not purely socioeconomic problem—must be made central in the issue of Mindanao conflict because it is the one that primarily defines the conflict. Whereas Luzon and Vizayas have their own problems, they are not plagued by rebellion like the Moro struggle. This is why we do not call the problem in those areas "Luzon conflict" or "Vizayan conflict." We do acknowledge, of course, that not all parts of Mindanao are plagued by conflict. Most of these areas simply have typical social problems similar to other parts of the country. However, those conflict-ridden are generally Muslim areas while non-Muslim areas happen to be the most developed ones. It follows that while the people in Mindanao have their own social problems, not all of them experience the gravity of problems experienced by Muslims who are directly affected by conflict. Problems in Muslim areas are qualitatively different from the rest of the country. This is the basic premise in addressing the Mindanao conflict.

The commonly-held view that the Mindanao conflict is essentially caused by socioeconomic problem, whose solution is *ipso facto* socioeconomic, is based on false assumption. While economic

development is aimed by all society, it is simply *incidental*, albeit not necessarily unimportant, to a community struggling for power and for their human and political rights. Therefore, it is off tangent to say that the *primary* cause of the Mindanao conflict is poverty and social and economic intervention its *main* solution.

All the Moro fronts from the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to the Abu Sayyaf—with all their notoriety and short-sightedness—never articulated economic development as the primary aim of their struggle. This is why their articulation is remiss with any taint of sophisticated Marxist or socialist program, theory of feudal and economic crisis and revolutionary ideology for Mindanao. What they all consistently raised was the right of the Bangsamoro people to regain their usurped sovereignty, their occupied Moro Homeland and the need for the Moro people to have an independent government so that they can implement their own laws including the *shari'ah*.

The social and economic problem of Mindanao while being recognized, is not fully articulated in the Moro struggle, because it is assumed, that if the Moros would be able to have power and be able to establish their own government, they can properly address those *incidental* problems. They believe that if those structural requirements are in place, social and economic development would automatically happen in their homeland. By then, they are more in the position to develop their own community at their own pace without them being told what to do and without them being forced to beg from other people and other country. As the government insisted in addressing socioeconomic problems without appropriating political structure—as it is too jealous with the idea of "Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity"—the Mindanao conflict has turned into a leech-like organism that exhausted national resources, sapped government's strength and spread the deadly virus on the whole nation which overshadowed the impact of social and economic intervention in Mindanao.

Assuming for the sake of argument that the Mindanao conflict is economic in nature or caused by poverty, is the government capable in providing economic solution to end the conflict? It is extremely doubtful, considering the overwhelming political and economic crisis which plagued the country for the past several years. In fact, it is argued that had the government been rational enough, it could have averted

the downturn of the country's national and economic power by allowing the Moros run their own affairs. By then, a division of labor in addressing the worsening problem of the entire nation could have been accomplished. However, since it was "national interest" that reigned, the government is now helpless not only in addressing the Mindanao conflict but other national problems as well. If the government is already helpless to alleviate worsening poverty and rising criminality in Metro Manila, including squatters' problem surrounding Malacañang itself, the more we doubt its capability to resolve the age-old Mindanao conflict.

It must be clear by now that over-reliance on the socioeconomic approach of the government is self-defeating. It does not only deplete government resources; it also promotes, and worse, institutionalizes a culture of mendicancy in many quarters of Mindanao. It cripples people's creative force to resolve their own problem, degrades their self-esteem (*martabbat*) and merely deepens their sense of shame even if the government showers them with hollow praises and platitude—like in calling them *mga kapatid naming Muslim* (our Muslim brothers)— amid stereotypes of "Islamic terrorists" and "Muslim bandits." Besides, it is political expediency and short-term concern that dictate the tempo of development and social projects in the area. "False psychology" has developed in the mind of the Muslims that those "assistance" are mere forms of government appeasement and attraction policy toward them.

While it is true that many parts of Mindanao have developed dramatically in the past few years, it is not due to government's effort in addressing people's social and economic concerns. It is primarily due to the absence of conflict in those areas. Therefore, socioeconomic intervention cannot be measured by fast-paced development of non-Muslim areas of Mindanao (e.g., Davao, Cagayan, General Santos). Developing these areas does not necessarily address the Mindanao conflict; it only addresses the social and economic problems in non-Muslim areas like other areas in the country. Certainly, it is not right for the government to peddle the Mindanao conflict to other countries and international funding agencies, as non-government organizations of various stripes ride on with the issue, yet re-channel funds and concentrate development on non-Muslim areas. This unscrupulous utilization of, and opportunism on, Mindanao conflict reflects the Tagalog saying—*"ako ang nagsaing, iba ang kumain"* (I cooked the food but others ate it). It definitely perpetuates the social and religious divide in Mindanao into poor Muslim areas and developed Christian

areas. This is why we say that addressing socioeconomic concerns does not necessarily end but simply elevates the Mindanao conflict into a higher level. It may temporarily soothe the pain but the conflict could be prolonged indefinitely.

Finally, we say that if the government continues to focus on addressing socioeconomic problems without re-arranging the political structure in Muslim Mindanao, we just hope that it has the resources and the face to beg from foreign countries and international donor agencies to convince them to pour the water of peace and development unto a bottomless container that is Mindanao.

<div style="text-align: right;">

JULKIPLI M. WADI
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UP INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

</div>

<div style="text-align: center;">

❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊

</div>

Addressing the socioeconomic concerns of the people in Mindanao would not end conflict and violence in Southern Philippines. It could help manage the situation in the area but it would not solve the problem. The conflict in Mindanao is rooted on a more fundamental issue—a "weak national identity arising from a weak Philippine state" (Quilop 2000, 19). Simply put, the Muslims in Mindanao have been unable or have resisted identifying themselves as members of the Filipino nation, something which Benedict Anderson would argue as an "imagined community." Of course, the Muslims could not solely be faulted for finding it difficult or even resisting to imagine themselves as members of this nation, if such a nation already exists, because the Philippine state has failed to lay the necessary requisites that could have made it easier for them to imagine themselves as part of the national community.

The Philippines, just like the other formerly colonized states of Southeast Asia, is composed of a number of ethnolinguistic groups and is therefore far from the ideal situation where just one ethnolinguistic group comprises a state. But it is also generally acknowledged that the presence of numerous ethnolinguistic groups in a state's territory in itself does not automatically lead to conflict. Conflict emerges only when a "group(s) dominates the rest by using the state or its instrumentalities for particularistic interests" prompting the rest, and in the case of the Philippines, the Muslims in Mindanao to

highlight their ethnic identities, rather than adopt the national identity (Quilop 2000).

Nation-building is of course a requisite to state-building, with states supposed to evolve from groups of people who have consolidated their identity as a nation. In the case of the Philippines, however, the Philippine state which traces its roots to Spain's colonial government meant mainly to govern Spain's new found territory, was established even before a Filipino national identity could be cultivated and developed among the people living in this group of islands.

But in spite of the Philippine state having been established ahead of a Filipino national identity being cultivated, a Filipino national identity could have still been developed. In fact, the state could have even served as a mechanism for bringing about national or "cultural homogeneity through integrative mechanisms" or for preparing "the ground work for the emergence of the nation" by promoting unity among the ethnic groups found in its territory (Lallana 1995, 3-5). Unifying ethnic groups meant providing them "a sense of belongingness in a national community that provides opportunities to attain economic well-being, participation in national policy-making process, and an understanding and appreciation of varied cultural identities and practices" (Quilop 2000, 21). But it appears the Philippine state has simply failed to do these.

The inability of the Philippine state to become an effective instrument for cultivating a sense of national identity for the Muslims is confounded by its inability to consolidate its authority over sub-national loci of political power and establish itself as the sole institution having the monopoly of governmental power.

The Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates were in fact able to maintain their integrity and flourished during the Spanish colonial period, with Sulu's success in centralizing its power laying the foundation for the struggle of an independent Moro nation (Lallana 1995, 16). Thus, state-formation characterized by the institutionalization of control by the central apparatus over sub-central power-holders failed to take root as "old localized organizations which previously made rules" were not transcended (Lallana 1995, 4; Migdal 1984, 12).

The inability of the state during the Spanish colonial era to consolidate its power persisted even after the post-colonial period, with local leaders being able to sustain their power and influence as state leaders prioritized their own political survival, prompting them to enter into compromises with local leaders instead of strengthening

the central apparatus of the state for governing. This resulted in "corruption, patrimonial plunder, electoral fraud, and clan-based politics" which weakened the state as a governing institution (Abinales 2000, 13). Such a relationship between the national and local elites made decision-making irrational and allocation of resources inequitable resulting in a situation where only the local elite benefits and not the entire local community. Eventually, the national government became dependent on the local elite for stability making the state a captive of local elite interests (Migdal 1987, 427). With the power of local elite in place, succeeding attempts by the state to centralize its power were therefore vehemently resisted. As Abinales correctly points out,

> where power is concentrated at the local level, attempts by the national state to centralize power seriously erode state authority and open it up to revolutionary challenge . (Abinales 2000, 14)

The weakness of the Philippine state has therefore made the consolidation of the Filipino national identity problematic as it now faces the desire by ethno-linguistic groups, particularly the Muslims in Mindanao, to assert themselves and demand for self-determination.

References

Abinales, Patricio. 2000. *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the formation of the Philippine nation-state*. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press.

Lallana, Emmanuel.1995. *State formation and nation construction in the Philippines*. Quezon City: College of Social Sciences and Philosophy.

Migdal, Joel. 1996. The state-in-society: An approach to struggles for domination. In *State power and social forces: Domination and transformation in the Third World*, eds. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, 7-36. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

_____.1987. Strong states, weak states: Power and accommodation. In *Understanding political development*, eds. Myron Weiner and Samuel Huntington, 391-434. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Quilop, Raymund.2000. The uneasy and costly road to peace in Mindanao. *Panorama* March 2000.

RAYMUND JOSE G. QUILOP
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR,
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN

* * * * *

(The views and opinions expressed herein are of the author's alone and do not reflect the official position of the Philippine Navy.)

Peter Gowing and Robert D. McAmis (1974, 1-11) once argued

> that no solutions to the problems of the Muslims in the Philippines can be effective or permanent without taking into consideration as a frame of reference the principle that the Muslims in the Philippines have an older history than any of the other Filipino groups or even of the Philippine nation itself, and this fact is a vital part of their self-consciousness and colors all their relationship with their fellow citizens.

> The 1994 Philippine Human Development Report echoed the same premise when it states that

> not all problems in human development may be solved by attaining rapid economic growth. Many marginal sectors will remain ill-equipped in terms of education, skills, social and economic infrastructure to participate in and benefit from even rapid growth. The South, especially Regions IX, X, XI, and XII, has been historically underserved by government, and this shows in the statistics… Basically, however, little will change unless policies change; and for this to occur, the country's politics must change toward more participation, involving especially the marginalized sectors in making decisions that affect them.

A decade later, the 2004 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report (UNDP HDR) says

> socio-economic injustices and inequalities in income, education and health outcomes have been the defining feature of many multi-ethnic societies with marginal groups. These exclusions reflect long historical roots of conquest and colonization. Economic and social policies that promote equity are critical in addressing these inequalities. Redressing biases in public spending as well as targeting basic services to people with lower health and education outcomes would help—but would not be enough. Multicultural policies that recognize differences between groups are needed to address the injustices that are historically rooted and socially entrenched.

Three long decades of theoretical development on the proper solution to the Mindanao problem will show that addressing the

socioeconomic issues in Muslim Mindanao is merely a shortcut solution to the whole issue of secessionism. It affirmed the inadequacy of the long-held view that bringing socio-economic development in Mindanao will solve the problem of insurgency and secessionism in that part of the country. To put it simply, the Mindanao question is not a simple problem of independence equals security plus prosperity or prosperity equals peace and security.

The Mindanao conflict is primarily caused by a succession of government blunders and inefficient policies crafted without clearly identifying and understanding the uniqueness of the Muslim culture and identity within Philippine society. Poverty, injustice, cultural deprivation, or religious intolerance are mere fruits of these policies. The fact is successive governments from the Spanish colonial period up to the present continue to implement policies that tried to pacify the Muslim population on one hand or seek their marginalization on the other. In my view, even the present government's Clear-Hold-Consolidate-Develop (CHCD) strategy is only a continuation of the inutile pacification policies of the past that produced nothing but hardships to our Muslim brothers and unnecessary burden on the national coffers. Bombing Muslim areas then rehabilitating and developing them later to promote economic progress in war-torn areas is not an effective way of ending the dispute in Mindanao. It may cease the conflict in the immediate future but it is not an assurance that peace will last. Arguably, such strategy produced substantial results against communist insurgents in the past. However, it does not mean it will be effective against Muslim secessionists. In short, the government cannot use the same strategy against two diametrically opposing and different types of conflict.

The conflict, having historical roots could find its solution on our understanding of history. One of the problems I encountered in discussing Muslim secessionism is the narrow-minded, one-sided and culturally insensitive accounting of Muslim history in the Philippines as taught by history teachers in almost all levels of our educational system. It rarely includes an analysis of past policies, debates, and events that eventually led to the Muslim rebellion and how the conflict progressed. This situation led to the development of misinformed biases towards our Muslim brothers, prejudices that also outline government policies, and a citizenry that is totally indifferent to the Muslim cause.

The solution then to the Mindanao problem is anchored on the evolution of a national consciousness sensitive to cultural diversity. It

is only when we recognize the differences between cultures can government adopt culturally-sensitive policies that aim to integrate our Muslim brothers into the mainstream rather than exclude them in our national life by the application of ineffective policies of the past.

Thus, it is about time for the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to review and effect changes in the history curriculum in so far as the history of Islam in the Philippines is concerned. Historians should consider revising history textbooks using as a reference point the unique history of Mindanao to emphasize the struggles of Muslim Filipinos. The government needs to formulate a new strategy that will make the educational system in our country part of the main solution that will introduce cultural understanding and ethnic awareness.

Reorienting the people's understanding of our history may be a monumental task. But if we have to take a step backward in order to make a giant leap forward, then the proper time is now. We could not go on making short steps forward without any clear sight of where we will end up. In sum, we need new solutions to old problems. Giving Muslim Mindanao autonomy and addressing the region's socioeconomic ills are not enough. As the 2004 UNDP HDR succinctly puts it: "people's cultural identities must be recognized and accommodated by the state, and people must be free to express these identities without being discriminated against in other aspects of their lives. In short: cultural liberty is a human right and an important aspect of human development—and thus worthy of state action and attention."

REFERENCES

Gowing, G. Peter and Mc Amis, Robert. 1974. *The Muslim Filipinos: Their history, society and contemporary problems*. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House.

United Nations Development Programme. 2004. *Human development report*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

United Nations Development Programme-Philippines. 1994. *Philippine human development report*. Quezon City: Human Development Network.

JESSE M. PASCASIO
SENIOR RESEARCHER
OFFICE OF SPECIAL STUDIES- PHILIPPINE NAVY

* * * * *

Of note, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) submitted a single talking point or agenda, that is, "To solve the Bangsamoro (Mindanao) Problem" during the opening of low-level peace talks with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) for discussion in the meeting between the GRP and MILF Technical Committee held at Crossing Simuay, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao on January 7, 1997.

Indeed, there is a need to find and reach a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the Mindanao problem that eludes past Philippine administrations of the post-global war era. This problem involves a variety of social, cultural, economic and political issues and concerns that include, but not limited to, the following:

1. ancestral domain
2. displaced and landless Bangsamoro people
3. destruction of properties and war victims
4. human rights issues
5. social and cultural discrimination
6. corruption of the mind and moral fiber
7. economic inequities and widespread poverty
8. exploitation of natural resources, and
9. agrarian-related issues.

In a nutshell, the above-mentioned issues and concerns are what the Mindanao people perceived as the root cause of the Mindanao problem, which was generally socioeconomic in nature. Addressing the socioeconomic concerns could indeed shed light at the end of the tunnel of finding solution to the Mindanao problem. However, many believe that it is not enough and could not solve the decade-old armed conflicts and Mindanao problem as proven by the past since the post-independence period.

One of the three major issues contained in the Tripoli Agreement on Peace of June 22, 2001 pertains to economic concerns and rehabilitation—proof that economic concerns are vital for finding a just, fair and acceptable solution to the Mindanao problem.

In pursuance to this particular provision and as part of MILF's standing commitment to address economic problem in Mindanao, the

Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) was organized in order to comply with its mandated task—to determine, lead, and manage economic and development projects in conflict-affected areas. However, to assume that the Mindanao problem is purely socio-economic in nature, disregarding other important factors of the issue is a fatal mistake.

EID KABALU
Spokesman
Moro Islamic Liberation Front

* * * * *

When the government repeatedly unleashed its military might against the Moro insurgents in Mindanao, it may have won some battles but not the entire war. The military solution had become a problem for thousands who have to run for their lives and suffer the hardships in evacuation centers. The wars buried Mindanao even deeper into what we call as the Mindanao Problem.

So, what is the Mindanao Problem? A number of analysts have attempted to provide an explanation for the conflict in Mindanao that has taken the lives of at least l20,000 people over the last 35 years. Coming from the government to the academe, media, NGOs, churches, and donor countries—most of them have concluded that the root cause of the problem is poverty, which is widely accepted in the free market of public opinion.

They argue that endless armed conflicts and violence in Mindanao continue because people are poor. Poverty is said to be the best breeding ground for rebellion. The military solution, they admit, is no longer the best option to eliminate rebellion. To win the war, the government must address the root cause of poverty. Peace and development are inseparable. The only way to address this is through economic development. Then, we will have peace. I wish the equation is as simple as this.

Ironically, Mindanao is a rich island. The Philippine economy depends on Mindanao for the 25 percent supply of rice, 67 percent of cattle and tuna, more than 50 percent of corn, fish and chicken, 100 percent of pineapple, rubber and banana exports, 90 percent of plywood and lumber, 63 percent of country's nickel reserves, 48 percent of gold reserves, 38 percent of forest and 38 percent of farmlands. Yet, Mindanao remains sick of an extraordinary disease with complicated and multiple origins. The Mindanao problem is a

complex problem—with visible and invisible and interrelated dimensions including political, economic, social, cultural and religious factors.

Experts often simplify the Mindanao Problem—a mistake that is frequently committed even by educated, well-meaning and good-intentioned people. Some would even call it the Moro Problem as if it does not affect other settlers and the *Lumads* as well. The danger of this mindset is that it fails to see the real complexity of the problem.

After the 2000 all-out-war in Mindanao, national and international government and non-government organizations rushed into the island to save the lives of more than one million displaced civilians. Different assessments and scientific findings point to the need for economic aid to rehabilitate the conflict-stricken communities. In my dealings with many of them, I found out that they perceive that the problem in Mindanao is poverty and the solution is not military but economic development. One study even quantified the economic costs that the government will lose if the war continues for the next ten years—US$2 billion. It cannot be denied that poverty is one of the root causes of unpeace in Mindanao as economic development as one of the solutions.

Junjun was seven years old in 2000 when he saw the execution of his father by armed men. When the rebels fled after the military arrived, Junjun gathered the empty bullet shells scattered on the ground. When his teary-eyed mother told him to throw them away, the boy refused and replied, "I will make these as amulets so that when I grow up I will join the military and I will kill those who murdered Papang." The leader of the armed men who ordered the execution was a survivor of the infamous Manili massacre. He was only a boy when about 75 innocent Muslim civilians were massacred by the Ilagas (literally "rats," a paramilitary group of Ilonggo settlers) in Manili, Carmen, Cotabato in 1971.

In February 2003, during the Buliok war, I met the mother and son again in one corner of the parish office. They joined the hundreds of Muslim and Christian civilians who sought refuge at the church. The mother was in tears and the boy was sitting in front of her with a backpack.

"What's wrong?" I asked the mother. "He does not want to leave our village, Father," she replied. "Try to look at what's inside his backpack," she suggested. When I opened the backpack, it saddened me to see it half-full of empty shells. "He hanged around at the army detachment and enjoyed collecting empty shells. That's the reason he

did not want to evacuate," the mother explained. Junjun was already 9 years old during that time.

The hardest part of rebuilding affected communities is not the rehabilitation of physical damages—implementing socioeconomic projects such as construction of core shelters and school buildings, livelihood projects, providing agricultural seeds and farm equipments, constructing post-harvest facilities, installing water facilities and latrines, constructing health centers and providing medicines, and rehabilitation of barangay roads. These are the easiest part of rehabilitation, in fact. The hardest part, I found out, is how to rehabilitate the feelings of people—hatred, anger, resentment, bitterness, distrust, suspicion, age-old biases and prejudices—that have polarized communities and created an invisible wall among the people of Mindanao.

Poverty is the main problem in Mindanao, the government believes. Bring development to Mindanao and the island will have peace. I wish that it will be easy. I was the chairman of the local monitoring council tasked to monitor government projects in the aftermath of the Rajahmuda war in 1997 that uprooted 30,000 civilians from their ancestral homes in the Liguasan Marsh. The government poured in P98 million in rehabilitation, mainly by implementing socioeconomic projects. But since then, we had had three major wars in Pikit—in 2000, 2001 and 2003. It means that development initiatives did not silence the guns in Pikit. I spent five years in Jolo and the people declared that if the amount of money spent by the government for economic projects were spent to purchase cement, the island of Jolo would have sunk to the bottom of the sea a long time ago. Jolo, up to this day, remains an island of violence.

If Manila can transport shiploads of food, medicines and even planeloads of soldiers and military hardwares to Mindanao, it can bankroll millions of pesos to bring peace to this troubled land. But I am afraid that they will not put an end to the conflict and violence in Southern Philippines because of things in this world which cannot be materially quantified—peace is one of them.

The Manila-based government must understand that peace cannot be simply transported nor transferred to Mindanao. Mindanaoans state that peace is like "a tree that must be planted in our ground and must be rooted in our soil."

The Mindanao conflict is not an invention of our time. It is historical in nature whose negative effects are deeply buried in the psyche of the people of the island. My assumption is that no amount

of socioeconomic intervention will solve the Mindanao problem unless the government also address, with the same passion, the political, social, cultural and religious dimensions of the problem. It must vigorously pursue the peace talks with armed groups to resolve the political issues. The clamor of the minorities in Mindanao for self-determination cannot be solved by giving them aid packages.

If the government wants to put an end to the Mindanao Problem it should lay down a comprehensive and holistic approach that will require the participation of all stakeholders from the academe, media, churches, NGOs, donor organizations and other civil society movements. The problem is so complex and the government cannot solve it alone. It cannot be solved by a simplistic, one-track approach which may yield significant results but may not entirely uproot the problem.

As a conclusion, I believe that addressing the issue of poverty through economic development is not going to entirely solve the Mindanao Problem. It is not even going to be completely solved in the negotiating table. Economic development and peace agreements cannot guarantee that there will be an instant and lasting peace in our communities as long as there is an unseen war going on in the hearts of the Mindanao people. It is this unseen war that is often overlooked not because it is invisible but simply because it is not quantifiable and does not pass the test of scientific analysis. Perhaps, it is only when Mindanaoans begin to see each other not only as neighbors and friends but as real brothers and sisters that Mindanao will know real peace.

<div align="right">

ROBERTO C. LAYSON, OMI
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION PARISH
PIKIT, COTABATO

</div>

<div align="center">

❊ ❊ ❊ ❊ ❊

</div>

Addressing the socioeconomic concern of the Mindanao people will help but, in itself, is not enough to put an end to the conflict and violence in Southern Philippines. This is most clear in the context of the Moro problem which is the most acute expression of the Mindanao conflict. The latter broader conflict is a problem of relationships among the three peoples (the majority Christian settlers/migrants and their descendants, the Moros or Muslims, and the indigenous highlander

tribes or *Lumads*) there *and* with the central Philippine government.
The problem thus has both horizontal (people-to-people) and vertical
(people-to-government) dimensions. The most critical dimensions
have been Christian-Muslim relations at the communal level and the
structural relationship between the Moro people and the central
Philippine government. This particular problem of relationships
resulted from the historical and systematic marginalization and
minoritization of the Moros, in their own homeland in Mindanao,
first by colonial powers Spain and the US, and more recently by
successor Philippine governments dominated by an elite with a
Christian-Western orientation. The contemporary armed struggle in
Muslim Mindanao led first by the Moro National Liberation Front
(MNLF) and then by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is the
sharpest expression of this problem.

It was W.K. Che Man, a Malaysian scholar, in a seminal work
comparing Muslim separatism of Southern Philippines and the Malays
of Southern Thailand (close to the border with Malaysia), who
incisively noted in 1990 that "while some Moro and Malay elites are
gradually absorbed into the Philippine and Thai systems through the
process of national integration and development, policies which seek
to redress the separatist problem through socioeconomic measures
designed to lift the living standards of ethnic minorities fail to recognize
that the ethnic protagonists perceive their conflict not in socioeconomic
terms but as ethnic, religious, and nationalist" (Che Man 1990, 178).

Thus, the socioeconomic package, which was part of the final peace
agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF in
1996, did not fully or completely solve the Moro problem. This was
the premise of peace talks with the MILF starting in 1997, with the
single talking point. Elaborated further, it is clear that the bottom-line
solution for the MILF (as was also with the MNLF) is political—finding
a political and lasting solution to this problem will form part of the
agenda in the forthcoming formal talks between the Government of the
Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF panels, with the end
in view of establishing a system of life and governance suitable and
acceptable to the Bangsamoro people.

Just how crucial—or rather non-crucial—the socioeconomic concern
is to the MILF-led Moro struggle is perhaps best illustrated by the late
MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim's answer to an interview question
about the Estrada administration's scheme to transform MILF camps
into economic zones in 2000: "I think it is part of the counter-

insurgency program of government to offer development. We welcome these offers. When government said it will convert these camps into economic zones, we didn't mind. Let them convert these into economic zones so we will have something to support our needs… You see, our revolutionary tactic is very unique. Some revolutionary organizations will never agree to the offer of government to develop their area because it is known as counter-insurgency but our people are different. The target of counter-insurgency is to stop the people from revolting against the Philippine government but in the case of our people here, they will never stop until they get independence. So no problem… If there will be no economic development, we cannot support our camp. We need economic development to support our fighters" (Arguillias 2000).

In other words, socioeconomic development of MILF areas will not necessarily dampen or sedate its revolutionary cause. Even development for counter-insurgency can be turned around its head into development for insurgency, if you will. But, of course, it can also be development for genuine and lasting peace. Though not decisive in solving the Moro problem, the socioeconomic component is still important, if not essential, for the peace process and any final peace agreement. This is why the peace process with the MILF has come up with the innovative concept of rehabilitation and development going hand in hand with the peace negotiations. This is not only a matter of confidence- or atmosphere-building. This has a longer term perspective of preparing beforehand the foundations of socioeconomic development in a post-conflict scenario. This is learning lessons from the peace process with the MNLF where this component was not prepared before the signing of the peace agreement and then was not addressed properly afterwards. It is also therefore not just a matter of addressing socioeconomic concerns but addressing them properly.

Having said all that about the Moro problem and struggle, we just round out the discussion of the question with some brief references to the two other peoples of the tri-peoples of Mindanao. For the *Lumads*, there is no doubt that their main concern is preservation of their ancestral domain or what is left of it. One might say that ancestral domain is a largely socioeconomic matter. But it also has its cultural aspects. This has to do with the very identity and way of life of the indigenous *cultural* community, "not only the physical environment but the total environment including the spiritual and cultural bonds to the areas."

For the majority Christian Filipinos in Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines, the root causes of rebellion are a mix of socioeconomic and political concerns: massive and abject poverty and economic inequity; poor governance, including lack of basic social services; injustice, abuse of power, human rights violations; and structural inequities in our political system. Addressing the socioeconomic concerns will go a long way, but in itself, will not be enough to put an end to the conflict and violence in Southern Philippines.

REFERENCES

Che Man, W.K. 1990. *Muslim separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand.* Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Arguillas, Carolyn.2000. "We have to fight forever": Interview with MILF Chair Salamat Hashim on April 15, 2000 in Camp Abubakar, Maguindanao. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 20 April 2000. In *Free the Bangsamoro: A compendium of essays on MILF and interviews with Chairman Sheikh Salamat Hashim,* ed., Nu'ain bin Abdulhaqq. Bangsamoro Darul Jihad: Agency for Youth Affairs–MILF.

SOLIMAN SANTOS, JR.
PEACE FELLOW
GASTON Z. ORTIGAS PEACE INSTITUTE

＊ ＊ ＊ ＊ ＊

The proposal to adopt the federal form of government has a two-pronged purpose: 1) to provide the foundation for a just and lasting peace in central and southwestern Mindanao, and 2) to speed up the economic development of the nation. The search for a just and lasting peace in central and southwestern Mindanao has proven to be intractable in the last five centuries. The Spanish and American colonizers had failed to bring peace to the area. Indeed, even our own government has not solved the recurrent Moro armed uprisings in those regions. The reason is that the various governments have tended to oversimplify the so-called Moro problem. They proposed superficial solutions that merely scratch the surface but not address the fundamental issues inherent in the problem. Our government's response to the armed challenges of the Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is a good example. In its response to the twin problems

posed by the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF, the government has blurred the distinction—a vital one—that divides the two groups into a gang of cutthroat hooligans, on one side, and a band of armed evolutionary partisans, on the other.

The Abu Sayyaf has used its guns to pursue a criminal agenda specializing in kidnapping, murder, arson, torture and other heinous crimes. Meanwhile, the MILF has used its arms to advance a political agenda—secession or independence. Parenthetically, I believe that the MILF's call for secession or independence is merely a bargaining chip which means that it is negotiable.

If a meaningful solution is to be provided to the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF challenges, we must begin by recognizing that the two groups are different from each other and should, thus, be treated differently. The Abu Sayyaf should be dealt with as a police matter, which means that the police should go after these hoodlums hammer and tongs and bring them before the bar of justice.

The MILF should be dealt with as a political matter, which means that the government should exert every effort to bring them back to the negotiating table and discuss all possible avenues that will lead to a just and lasting peace to the region that is wracked by violent unrest. The distinction bears underscoring because even the government treats the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF as one and the same brutal gang simply because their adherents are mostly Moros or Muslims. That is why the wrongful premise that the gun is the best means to solve the problems posed by both the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf gives currency to the view. Thus, there is a need to remind ourselves that the gun has never succeeded in establishing peace in central and southwestern Mindanao. The historical experience of the country bears out this conclusion. For almost four hundred years, the Spanish colonial government (1521-1898) attempted to impose its will by force upon the Moros in the regions but they failed. For almost fifty years, the American regime (1898-1946) tried to do the same by force and guile. They did not also quite succeed. And for the last 58 years, our government (1946 to the present) has been struggling to address the same problem. Neither have we had much success. Eschewing sound analysis, the government has compounded the problem by lumping the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF together, as if they are one and the same gang of cutthroats, and by deciding to meet their challenges by a single approach: the use of an all-out superior armed force to quell their uprisings.

The position of the government is only partially correct as far as the Abu Sayyaf is concerned, but certainly not as far as the MILF is concerned. The two groups are miles apart in their objectives and methods of challenging the government. Moreover, the lessons of history teach us that the use of all-out force against Moro arms has never brought and will never by itself bring peace to central and southwestern Mindanao. There needs to be a comprehensive plan that addresses not the seasonal, tribal complaints of the Tausugs or the Maranaos or the Maguindanaos or any other Moro group but the fundamental grievances of the Bangsamoro as a people. This is not to say that the government should merely sit idly while tribal Moro arms challenge it. The government, of course, has the right and the duty to assert its superiority over those who challenge it by the use of force. But the use of superior government arms should only be tactical, not strategic, in the matter of dealing with Moro armed uprisings. Otherwise, the use of force will result only in establishing the peace of the graveyard, not in the just and lasting peace that we all want for Mindanao and the rest of the country.

It is plainly evident that the use of force has not solved the so-called Moro problem in central and southwestern Mindanao. Up to this day, there is no just and lasting peace. The government killed Dimakaling, a rebel leader of Lanao in the 1930s; subdued Kamlon of Sulu in the 1950s; pacified Matalam of Cotabato in the 1960s, and alternately warred against and talked peace with Misuari of Sulu from the 1970s up to the start of this century. A clearer case against the use of force and of the tactic of divide and rule as a policy could hardly be established. What is abundantly clear is that the policy of force and of divide-and-rule have never worked to achieve a just and lasting peace in central and southwestern Mindanao in the past. Neither will it work today as against the MILF.

How, then, do we solve the problem? I suggest the following steps: a) in the short run, we have to declare a ceasefire; b) in the middle run, we should negotiate with the MILF rebels, perhaps even get the US Institute of Peace to broker the search for peace in Mindanao and bring development to the island; and c) in the long run, we have to offer to the Bangsamoro a federal state of their own that will remain as a part of the federal republic. For purposes of brevity, I will focus on the proposal to adopt a federal form of government which will create 10 federal states for the entire country. Luzon may have four federal states: the federal states of northern Luzon, central Luzon, southern Tagalog

and Bicol. Metro Manila may be converted into a special federal administrative center, like Washington, D.C., or Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. The Visayas may have three federal states: Eastern Visayas, Western Visayas and Central Visayas. Mindanao may have three federal states: Norhern Mindanao, Northeastern Mindanao and the Bangsamoro. Under a federal set-up, the powers of government will be shared principally between the Federal Government and the federal states. The sharing of powers will be defined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic.

What will happen to the local governments if the federal system is adopted? It depends on the way the constitution would deal with the matter. If the constitution would empower federal states to deal with local government units as they please, then, the present structure and powers of provinces, cities, municipalities and barangay—as we now know them—may be modified, retained or altogether abolished by the federal states. My view, however, is that with the exception of the barangay, perhaps, it is best to retain the provinces, cities and municipalities as units of local government. Otherwise, we create enemies out of the local government officials and they would be a formidable force to contend with when the new constitution that contains provisions for the adoption of the federal system is submitted to the people for ratification. In my conversations with Moro rebel leaders that include Hashim Salamat (may he rest in peace) and Al Hadj Murad of the MILF, and Nur Misuari of the MNLF as well as with Moro political, professional and civic leaders and the *ulama* (Muslim religious leaders), I gather that they, like me, believe that the adoption of the federal system will bring about a just and lasting peace and development to the Moro-dominated local government units in and to the rest of Mindanao. The creation of a federal state of the Bangsamoro would give the Moros of Mindanao greater opportunity to promote their own identity and culture and develop their own economic potential at their own pace without the need of seceding or declaring their independence from the republic.

As for the rest of the country, the adoption of the federal system would unleash the forces of friendly competition for the development of their respective federal states. Whereas now in a unitary system, there is only one center of power and development, Manila, under a federal system there would be in our proposal an addition of ten centers of power and development in the ten federal states that are proposed for creation.

Can Muslims and Christians coexist? My answer is, why not? Muslims and Christians coexist peacefully in my hometown, Cagayan de Oro City, in Davao City, in Cotabato City, in Tagbilaran City, in Cebu City, in Manila, in Taguig, in Tuguegarao, and in hundreds of communities throughout the land. The fact that Muslims and Christians in these communities live together as neighbors without killing one another shows that, indeed, no religious divide separates our people into irreconcilable, hostile blocs. Moreover, I am most optimistic that sooner than later, the Christians and the Muslims of this country will realize that we descended from one father—Abraham—and we belong to one and the same country, the Philippines. And that our two religions, instead of separating us, should bind us to the same Supreme Being and lead us to respect one another. After all, Muslims do proclaim that Islam is a religion of peace and all Christians believe that Christianity is a religion of love. Is it not incongruous, then, for the followers of a religion of peace to butcher the followers of the religion of love and vice versa? I pray with all my heart that Muslims, Christians and the *Lumads* will share the same frame of mind before more lives are lost.

AQUILINO Q. PIMENTEL, JR.
SENATOR, REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES