

# Armed Conflict in Sulu: A Local Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

War has marred the landscape of Sulu. For decades now in contemporary Moro history, Jolo<sup>2</sup> has figured prominently in the national news as insurgent territory, embattled homeland of Moro fighters. Beginning in the 1970s when the Misuari-led Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) set off a secessionist war against the central state power in Manila and “Filipino colonialism,” Jolo and neighboring islands have never known peace at length. Revolts and pockets of rebellion, along with local feuds, have time and again sent people out of their homes, some families moving to other quieter islands or cities and as far as Sabah in Malaysia. The latest of these conflagrations happened in February 2005 when some members of the MNLF<sup>3</sup> launched an attack against the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)<sup>4</sup>, prompting the national government to send battalions of troops into the embattled territory. The AFP bombarded alleged Abu Sayyaf lairs in a nine-day campaign “to punish the renegades” and hitting mostly residential areas. By 19 February the Provincial Civil Defense Office in Sulu counted the number of internally displaced at 2,689 families or a total of 26,000 people. Other counts were slightly higher, but whatever the more accurate figure may have been, the more important facts might have to be accounted in what these wars now mean for the inhabitants of Sulu Islands. For even as a large number of the old guards in the MNLF now succumbed to government enticements, and top leader Nur Misuari still in jail, a new crop of leaders and fighters have apparently risen. What this current war is all about and where do the ordinary Taosugs and Moro civilians stand in all this are questions this research hopes to address.

### Literature review: The research context

There has been of late a plethora of literature on armed conflict in Mindanao, a bulk of which are focused on what have come to be known in nongovernment organization (NGO) parlance as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Valuable for documenting and profiling war effects, most of these cannot go past deploring the sorry state of the IDPs, invariably ending with big recommendations about implementing a comprehensive rehabilitation and reconstruction and peace building projects. These are accompanied, in equal volume, by studies on children in armed conflict, which usually project children as fodder or “exploited labor” of wars their rebel fathers foisted on them. While laudable in their success in obtaining greater welfare benefits for poor rural children – usually in the form of more day care centers, preschools, *madrasahs*, scholarships, supplementary nutrition – and in mobilizing political resources toward cessation of hostilities and infrastructure building, these studies often fail to appreciate the cultural and political context within which war or an ongoing rebellion takes place. Often, these literatures only serve to reflect White middleclass views and welfare policies developed in affluent beneficent countries which the local population do not necessarily share.

Standing in line under the shade of a Church-led<sup>5</sup> civil society movement, almost every other NGO in Mindanao now runs a peace program, with strong backing from international NGOs (INGOs) fostering the most harmless interest in Mindanao. As though to give substance to exhortations for peace, a handful of materials on peace building have likewise been produced,<sup>6</sup> featuring progress made in peace zones. Scarce as yet are the critiques of peace initiatives,<sup>7</sup> likely because of the overwhelming positivism that continues to impel the peace movement, and also because the impetus for a contrary tendency is yet unshaped.

This current attention on the peace situation in Mindanao – and the volume of literatures coming with it – has been largely occasioned by the wide interest garnered by the continuing peace process that began with the MNLF in 1996 and then later with MILF in 1997. There was great optimism of finally putting an end to Moro rebellion especially after Nur Misuari assumed governorship of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and agreed to reintegrate MNLF forces into the

AFP. Billions of pesos were invested in the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD)<sup>8</sup> as international financial institutions came together to carry out a comprehensive economic development program that would purportedly eradicate poverty and stem the roots of conflict in the region. The project was by no means local. In the global scale it came in the aftermath of the Cold War that projected the United States (US) as beneficent donor to war-ravaged areas in the Third World struggling to rebuild their economies.

### Research objectives

This research work has been undertaken to surface data on armed conflict in Mindanao and, more importantly, to draw out voices of local people most affected and involved in the conflict. Other than enumerating losses and damages and numbers of IDPs, something which has been done pretty well by many NGOs working with Mindanao's displaced persons, this research work hopes to go further by reappraising conventional social welfare categories and the peace paradigm that govern current social movements. In relation to this, we want to surface voices, local perspectives, which may not and do not necessarily reflect populist notions about peace and armed conflict. Particularly, we pay attention to dissenting voices: views and opinions that interrogate not only the dominant ideology and powers behind the promotion and continuance of the war in Sulu, but also those that critique prescriptions and popular beliefs held by social development institutions and peace advocates.

### Scope and limitations of the study

The municipalities of Indanan and Panamao are the two identified areas covered by this study. Site of past military operations as well as rebel activities for the last three decades, these two areas are also the most badly hit in the February 2005 bombardment of Sulu. Most of the residents are Taosug and Sama natives who survived repeated warfare and countless military operations. The areas also had at one time or another fallen victim to extortive activities of bandits and loose armed groups and figured in election-related violence staged by warring politicians.

Owing to the tense situation in the research area, entry had not been an easy process. Hostility to military operations and distrust of non-locals compelled the researchers team<sup>9</sup> to minimize movement and commute daily between the research area and Jolo proper where they were lodging, as staying the night in the hills was not advised. Scheduled interviews were also hard to have because almost all of the respondents had to work in their farms from dawn to midday and had to be in the market in Jolo proper peddling *ukay-ukay* (secondhand clothing) from two o'clock to five in the afternoon. It was also difficult to obtain official figures (names and families of the IDPs), if they were available at all, as one had to secure "permission from the higher authorities" to be able to have access to these.<sup>10</sup>

One agenda that this research has not adequately addressed is gender. Other than a few statements taken from women respondents during the field work, so little data had been surfaced detailing the gender aspects of war. This has been partly on account of the milieu the researchers entered (war area being a male domain and most of the "crew" – guides, local leaders and barangay officials, fighters, runners, etc. – that attended to the team's research needs were mostly males). Also, the two field workers were already too overlade with various tasks, not to mention the stress associated with security hazard and the limited budget, to further encumber themselves with more research items. The third member of the team who was the more keen and uncompromising when it came to gender aspects of research was not able to join the field work also due to budget limitations, as she is based in Davao City. Then the team had also to take consideration of sensitivity to issues such as sexual violence in armed conflict: While this is not an impermeable subject, a one- to two-week field work would not be enough to bring these out.<sup>11</sup>

### Research methodology

This research mainly relied on in-depth interviews and storytelling as methods of data gathering. This required building of rapport with respondents which was not easy to do since the security situation required for the researchers to go home each night and only see them in between their farm and trade work. Budget limited data gathering days to only a week in February 2006.

For the children, play sessions were employed to draw out the stories from them. They were also asked to share their experiences through a combination of draw-and-tell activities and small group discussions. In situations where the children were unable to explain their drawings, their mothers and adults were asked to help. Through these methods, the researchers were able to get views, silenced voices, as well as local people's values, perceptions, and attitudes toward their situation.

### Sulu: A situationer

#### *Historical background*

Power struggles are certainly not new in the province of Sulu. Long before the Europeans arrived, conflicts within the Sulu Sultanate and between the different Muslim sultanates were common. The arrival of the Spaniards and their determination to wipe out Muslim rule provided a motivation for local chiefs to join forces against the foreign invaders. In the end defeat of the once powerful Sulu Sultanate and the erosion of the *Dar-ul Islam* (Muslim homeland) was assured not only by the superior armed might of the invaders, but also by the bloody rivalry among the Moro ruling elite (Mercado 1990, 38). The history of Spain in the Philippines is punctuated by battles between Spaniards and Muslims as Spain attempted to extend its sovereignty and trade into the southern islands and the so-called Moro wars began with a Spanish attack on the capital of the Sulu Sultanate in 1578 (Magdalena 1990, 14). The Spaniards were able to establish garrisons in Jolo where they maintained troops for a short time, but they never succeeded in gaining a permanent foothold in Sulu beyond Jolo town. They eventually abandoned their attempt to dominate Sulu and forged a truce with the Muslims during their final years in the Philippines (Interview with Gaspar Abubakar, 01 February 2006).

When the Americans took over the Philippines in 1898,<sup>12</sup> they discovered that the Filipinos throughout the archipelago were none too happy about the arrival of another colonial power. A bloody chapter in Philippine history took place before the US finally established control of the islands. Mindanao (and Sulu Islands in particular) was even harder to pacify and it took several more years of bloodshed before the Americans were able to establish a government in Sulu. Major General Leonard Wood became the first American Governor of the

Moro Province. By 1913, most of Mindanao and Sulu were under relative control as the pacification campaign succeeded in neutralizing Moro resistance. The period of American rule, which lasted until 1935, was relatively peaceful.

When the Japanese came in 1942, they established a major base in Jolo. The Taosugs were not spared from *corvee* (forced labor) and were made to build airstrips. A resistance movement was organized which actively operated in Sulu throughout the Japanese occupation and later helped the Allied Forces liberate the islands.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the war with Japan in 1946, America handed the reins of government to Filipinos under the Commonwealth period. The people of Sulu once again saw an outside power moving in. The Christian Filipino government in Manila would be resisted again and again not only for its failure to respond to the basic social needs of the Moro people but more so for the loss of homeland that occupancy of Mindanao by Filipino colonials effected.

During the late 1950s, the Philippine government began a land resettlement program to move Christians from heavily populated sections of Luzon to seemingly empty areas in the Muslim provinces. The policy was in response to the growing land unrest in the north. Muslims who held traditional claim to the lands in Mindanao resented the influx of Christian settlers, but most were too unlettered and too indifferent to the new laws that they later found themselves dispossessed. Sulu was saved from this land resettlement policy, thanks partly to the reputation of the Taosug as a warrior tribe, and partly to the unpopularity of Sulu archipelago as agricultural lands. The economy of the islands is traditionally anchored on trade with subsistence farming maintained only by farmers living inland.<sup>14</sup> This trade economy predates the establishment of the current national boundaries. Under Philippine government, this continuing trade relations with countries south of Sulu would fall under illegal trade or smuggling. Under the Marcos administration, large garrisons of Philippine Constabulary (PC) would be installed in the southern borders to deal with this problem of lost revenue to the national government. A common knowledge in the south is that this southern patrol had developed into a business connivance between Army and Marine commanders and Moro smugglers.

While a few elite families managed to hold on to their privileged position, majority of the native inhabitants of Mindanao have been economically marginalized on account of the coming of Christian

settlers.<sup>15</sup> This reinforced historically rooted prejudices against the Filipino *indios* as enemy. All throughout the period of colonial invasion into Moroland, Filipino natives were conscripted by foreign powers to fight the Moros. In their campaigns against the recalcitrant Muslims, Spanish governors sent more Christian Filipinos than Spanish soldiers.<sup>16</sup> Massacres of Moros by American-led Filipino soldiers are stories planted in the collective memory of the Moro people. Present wars directed by Filipino generals under the succession of Filipino presidents could just be repetitions of these tragedies in Moro history.

### *Socioeconomic profile*

Sulu Province at present is composed of 157 islands, many of them still unnamed. Divided into four groups, namely, the Jolo group, the Pangutaran group, the Tongkil-Banguingui group and the Siasi-Tapul group, these islands have varied terrain and economic resources (Sulu Provincial Office, 2005). The Tongkil Banguingui islands, in particular, are occupied by the various Sama groups, also known as the Samales, a highly dispersed Moro group. These different communities occupy diverse ecological niches resulting in distinct socioeconomic characteristics, with the Taosugs in Jolo as the most dominant social group, that monopolizes political power and trading in the south.<sup>17</sup> Juridically, Sulu has eighteen municipalities and 410 barangays. Ten of these are in mainland Jolo while the eight are island municipalities. Jolo, Talipao, Siasi, Parang, Indanan, Patikul, Luuk, and Panamao are the more densely populated, holding at least fifty-six percent of the entire province's population. Various government agencies have varying reports on the total land area of Sulu, ranging from 160,040 hectares per the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority to 167,930 hectares per the National Statistics Office (Sulu Provincial Office 2005).

As of 2000, the NSO placed Sulu's population at 619,668, with more females than males (at the ratio of ninety-six males for every 100 females). This can be attributed to higher mortality rate among men who are mostly engaged in risky occupations, including rebellion and providing security to local warlords. This is supported by data on the widowed which is higher among females (at seventy-one percent) than males (twenty-nine percent). An overwhelming 85.27 percent of the

population are Taosugs; the rest are minority Sama tribes including the Bajau. A tiny 2.63 percent belong to non-Muslim ethnic groups and are generally employed in the government service sector as teachers, municipal employees, or health workers. Generally, fishing and farming remain the traditional source of livelihood of the minority Moro groups, supplemented by retailing and food vending. Traditional crafts such as mat-weaving and loom-making have also become a source of income for women (Sulu Provincial Office 2005).

Economically, Sulu lagged behind most of the Philippine islands. The high rate of illiteracy has kept majority of the population poor and without access to employment opportunities, driving many of the young to engage in rebel activities. The few who managed to get an education in the Middle East, particularly in Al-Azhar University in Egypt, would later return home to provide leadership for the resistance movement. Young women privileged enough to finish high school or college opt to work in big cities or, when family resources would allow, in Middle East countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. The peace and order situation is blamed for the paucity of economic activities in the province. Many farmers are reluctant to work beyond the two-kilometer safe radius from Jolo, the capital town, and many in the various services and trade sector prefer to set out for other places to get more gainful employment. Forty-five percent of Sulu's 99,416 households have annual incomes within the PhP20,000 – PhP59,000 bracket, earning an average of PhP33,039 or PhP2,753 monthly. And while agriculture remains the main source of employment, only ten to forty percent of the province's labor force actually engage in crop production (Sulu Provincial Office 2005).

Poverty is exacerbated by poor delivery of basic social services, blamed again on the unstable peace and order situation in the province. In 2000, twenty-nine percent of the households drew drinking water from dug well while twelve percent sourced water from faucets shared with other households. Only fourteen percent had their own faucets in their houses. Toilet facilities were likewise poor, with only seventeen percent having water-sealed toilets. Thirty-eight percent use open pit; thirteen percent closed pit; and fourteen percent had no toilets at all. Maternal mortality rate was at 181.15 per 100,000 live births in 2002. The high rate is again attributed to the heavy presence of armed groups in the area during the year which made access to health care services doubly difficult. Leading causes of deaths were post-partum

hemorrhage, hypertension in pregnancy, and placental retention. In 2000, only 45.62 percent of pregnant women were given tetanus toxoid plus injections, a figure which decreased by fifteen percent in 2002. The low tetanus immunization is attributed, primarily, to non-compliance of mothers for the return visits, irregular schedule of immunization, inadequate information dissemination and insufficient supply of vaccines and, secondarily, to the peace and order situation. There is likewise a severe shortage of health workers as they do not receive any financial compensation owing to Local Government Unit's (LGU) failure to give the Barangay Health Workers (BHWs) their honoraria. Infant mortality rate in 2000 was at 7.35 per 1,000 live births, decreasing to 4.86 per 1,000 live births in 2002. Leading causes of death include pneumonia, diarrhea, and measles, with malnutrition as contributing factor (Sulu Provincial Office 2005).

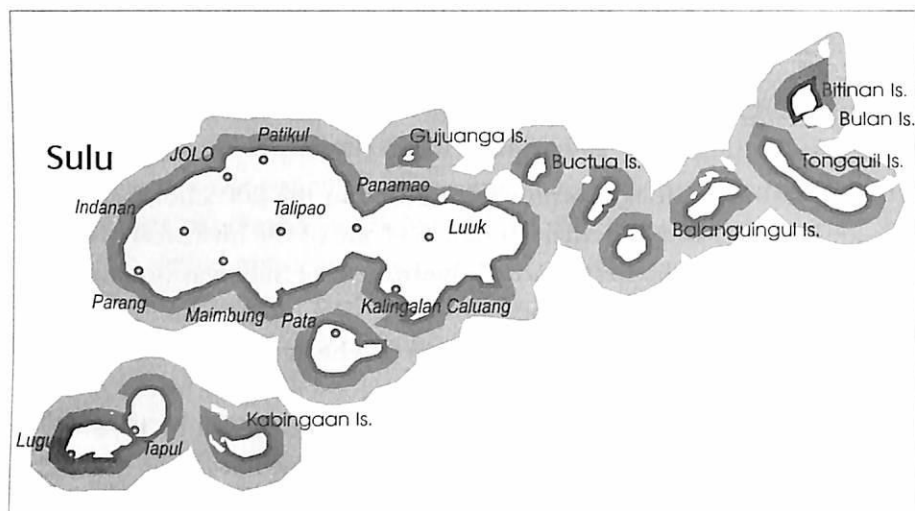
### *The conflict areas*

Two municipalities prominently figured in the 2005 bombardment of Jolo: Indanan and Panamao. Indanan is one of the historical places in Sulu. It was where the first central government of Sulu was organized in 1390 by Rajah Baguinda, the acclaimed Muslim leader who propagated Islam in Mindanao, Palawan, and Borneo. The seat of the Sultanate of Sulu itself was set up in Bwansa, seven kilometers southwest of Jolo. Bwansa could have been the very site Spain bombarded in 1578 when it launched its first attack on the sultanate. It could have been the same fortification that withstood the troops of 600 Spaniards and 3,000 Filipinos in 1638, the same waning power that fought the 600 Filipino volunteers in 1875. The bombardment of Jolo in February 2005, which at its height deployed 5,000 AFP forces in Indanan, Panamao, and neighboring areas, could have been history repeating itself.

Indanan was created a municipality in 1917 under the Philippine Commonwealth Government. It was named after Panglima Indanan, one of the local chiefs under the Sultanate of Sulu, recognized for his leadership and courage in peace and in war. As a royal gesture of generosity, the Sultan offered to Panglima Indanan the place where he resided to be ruled by him (Sulu Provincial Planning and Development Office 2005). During the reign of the sultanate (spanning almost 500 years from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth century),

Moro settlements straddled the coastal areas and mosques, Islamic schools, and administrative buildings were constructed along the shores. Livelihood and most economic activities were rooted in barter trading. With the coming of the Spanish and American invaders, settlements moved inward, particularly in Indanan and adjacent areas, where local defenders built their houses and strongholds. It was also in Indanan where the Americans built the first school in Sulu in 1920 – an act which at the time was interpreted by the natives as a centerpiece of colonial policy. At present, a *Bay Puti* or White House stands as a vestige of this colonial policy (Sulu Provincial Planning and Development Office 2005).

Figure 1. Map of Jolo.



Indanan is situated in mainland Jolo, some 155 kilometers south of Zamboanga City. It stands northeast of Jolo, east of Patikul, west of Sulu sea, southeast of Parang, south of Maimbung and southeast of Talipao (see map). Covering a total land area of 10,190 hectares, Indanan represents 6.07 percent of the Province's total land area. Eighty-five percent of Indanan's land is agricultural, 9.81 percent forest area, 1.47 percent mangrove, and 2.32 percent residential. It has thirty-four barangays, with five major rivers and twelve mountains.

Indanan has a total population of 53,425 as of 2000 of which 25,972 or 48.62 percent are males and 27,453 or 51.38 percent females. Sixty-four percent of the households are farmers; only 3.60 percent are engaged in

fishing. Of the thirty-four barangays, Bato-Bato, Bud Taran, Sionogan, Panabuan, Langpas, and Bwansa are the more densely populated, with around 2,500 to 3,500 people each. The rest of the barangays hold less than two thousand people each, with Panglima Misuari having the smallest population at 476 people. Most of the houses in Panamao are made of light materials. For most households, calamity comes in the form of a feud between local warlords and politicians, military operations, and for those who live in the coast, the *uttaru'* (north wind), which usually hits Bajau houses.

A highly depressed area, Panamao sits on fifty-one square kilometers representing 3.29 percent of the total land area of Sulu. Classified as fifth class municipality, it has thirty-one barangays and has a population of 35,906 as of 2000 composed of 5,663 households. There are more females (51.06 percent) than males (48.94 percent) (Sulu Provincial Planning and Development Office 2005). Native Taosugs make up the majority, with Bajaus comprising the minority and are found in the coastal barangay of Suuh.

Rich in both marine and land resources, the people of Panamao depend on farming and fishing for a living. Lack of roads and poor transportation facilities prevent the marketing of their farm products. Those residing in the interior and upland areas transport their crops by horseback or by cart drawn by a cow. Panamao's main crops include copra, banana, cassava, and vegetables. In the interior barangays, upland rice, coffee, peanuts, and fruit trees are cultivated. Livestock raised include cows, goats, and chickens. In the coastal barangays seaweeds are grown. Traders who buy the products in the highway or wait in Jolo market depress the prices that farmers are often discouraged from producing beyond what would sustain household consumption. Fishermen are not any luckier. The absence of a wharf or causeway in the municipality forces them to deliver their catch to Jolo market by motorcycle or, when they catch one, by jeepney which usually charges high.

Employment outside the agricultural sector is nil. The Municipal Office employs a total of sixty-five people, 44.62 percent of whom are permanent, the rest casual or under temporary appointments. There are more males (thirty-six) than females (twenty-nine). All the eleven Sangguniang Bayan (legislative body) members of the town are males. Of the thirty-four barangay heads, five (14.71 percent) are females, the rest (85.29 percent) males.

Social services are inadequate. Health services are delivered through a rural health unit (RHU) with one nurse, four midwives and two sanitary inspectors. The RHU is however closed most of the time as the health personnel are unable to come most days due to the peace and order situation. Besides the RHU, Panamao has been recently provided a district hospital. Constructed in 2003, the hospital has thirty-two staff, with one physician, one administrative officer, one dentist, one pharmacist, one medical technologist and four nurses. Most common ailments include malaria, colds, diarrhea, measles, and skin diseases. Water sources are mostly still in Level I (dug well). The coastal area has been observed to be more receptive to contagious diseases (Sulu Provincial Planning and Development Office 2005).

Literacy rate is at 43.4 percent in 1990, improving to sixty-five percent by the year 2000. There are two secondary schools, at Poblacion Seit and Patibulan, six elementary schools, and five primary schools. Far-flung barangays usually have only primary and elementary schools and children have to walk at least three kilometers from their houses to get to school. Lack of teachers and educational materials, not to mention lack of school buildings, remain a crying need. For every 100 pupils enrolled in Grade I, twenty-five finish elementary education, ten finish high school, and at most five get to college. Of those with higher educational achievements, females generally outnumber the males (Sulu Provincial Planning and Development Office 2005).

### *The Moro insurgency*

The Muslim separatist resistance in Southern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago is one of the most profound events in Philippine history. This rebellion attests to the unconquered spirit of a people that once upon a time were the sovereign rulers of Mindanao. Though now minoritized and marginalized, thanks to what it now calls the "Filipino colonial government," this rebellion, which resulted in a civil war that only recently abated into a very tenuous peace, is far from finished.

The rise of Islamic nationalism around the world in recent time has lent new energy and new power to this resistance. Propelled by a dream of a *Dar-ul Islam* (an Islamic community), Muslim communities have over and over again supported calls for Islamic unity and self-governance. The MNLF, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF),

and other Moro rebel formations that came after were forged and fostered by this desire for self determination and sovereignty. Met with the national government's militarist response on the one hand and an assimilationist policy on the other hand, the rebellion has had no other way but to grow and survive. The early years of Martial Law were particularly colorful and bloody years for the Moro people: It was the height of the Moro uprising. *Ang mga kabataan nuon ay nabuhay sa takot. Marami sa mga nakakatanda sa amin ay ipinabuli at ipinakulong ng mga militar nang walang kasalanan. Karamihan sa kanila ay pinahirapan muna bago pinatay. Kaya sa mga panahon ding ito halos labat ng mga kabataang kalalakihan sa Sulu edad trese pataas ay boluntaryong sumanib sa MNLF.* "The young lived in fear. Civilians were being picked up and jailed by the military. Many were tortured before they were killed. So it was at this time that almost all the young boys in Sulu aged thirteen and above volunteered to join the MNLF" (FGD conducted in Indanan last 31 January 2006).

The war in the 1970s was fierce. There was massive evacuation of people, Muslims and Christians, as MNLF combatants and AFP soldiers, with the help of paramilitary forces, exchanged fire (Mercado 1990, 39). The Bangsamoro homeland became a virtual garrison as the AFP deployed its arsenal in Mindanao. The movement of people was such that the ethnic composition of some places was drastically altered. By 1976, casualties were placed at 60,000 dead, with refugees to Sabah numbering around 300,000 (Mercado 1990, 40).

The confrontation with the Philippine military was particularly intense in Jolo. In February 1974, MNLF forces attempted to take control of Jolo town from the Philippine government troops. The ensuing battle resulted in the destruction of the Sulu province. Thousands fled Jolo. In subsequent years, more people escaped to the southern islands, particularly to Bongao and Tawi-Tawi islands,<sup>18</sup> including Sabah in Malaysia, as the war continued (Interview with Dr. Lakkian, 01 February 2006). Barjaya Baddang, one of the key respondents for this research, was one of those who joined the takeover. He said that many went to nearby provinces, but others chose to leave the Philippines for eastern Borneo, especially Sabah. Barjaya himself left with his family for Sabah in 1976 and stayed there for three years. In 1979, he came back hoping that the war had ended<sup>19</sup> (Interview, 03 February 2006).

### *The Tripoli Agreement*

The 1970s was also marked by an intensifying communist insurgency which was equally costly for the government coffers. Unwilling to expend its resources in a two-pronged war in a prolonged period, the Marcos government sought for a peaceful resolution of the Mindanao conflict. A truce was brokered with the help of the powerful Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and the Tripoli Agreement was signed between the MNLF and the Philippine government. The Tripoli Agreement provided for the establishment of autonomy in the thirteen provinces of Mindanao and Sulu "within the sovereignty and integral territory of the Republic of the Philippines and subject to its constitutional processes" (Mercado 1990, 40). The phrase "constitutional processes" would later allow the government to outmaneuver the MNLF, by holding a referendum in the thirteen provinces that would divide Mindanao and Sulu into two "autonomous regions" and allow certain provinces to opt out of Moro political leadership. Disagreement led to the breakdown of the peace talks. As Misuari backed out of the peace process and went back to armed rebellion, Marcos moved along to implement the agreement according to his own interpretation and proceeded with enticing top cadres of MNLF with monetary incentives and lucrative posts in government to legitimize his own version of autonomy. This was followed by an enormous building of a cultural edifice of the Autonomous Region: mosques, madrasahs, Muslim centers, public works, housing projects, Islamic studies, royal houses, Muslim scholarships, Muslim holidays, and so on.

About this time also divisions within the MNLF surfaced, made official in 1983 when Hashim Salamat declared the formation of the MILF.<sup>20</sup> Another MNLF faction would later emerge, the MNLF-Pundato Group, allegedly created by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to weaken the Misuari leadership. All this, together with Marcos' "policy of attraction" combined to undermine the MNLF as a revolutionary force. As confusion and demoralization spread among the MNLF's rank and file, Marcos consolidated his hold on Mindanao. Thanks to the ample help of Moro traditional leaders and former MNLF commanders, he was able to contain the Moro rebellion for a long while that prior to his ouster from power, the Moro resistance was no longer considered a major threat.

### *The Mindanao Peace Process*

The coming into power of Corazon Aquino on 25 February 1986 via "people power" occasioned a resumption of the peace process with the MNLF. The 1986 Constitution provided for the creation of an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao. But again, implementation was not much different from the Marcos ploy: It required a plebiscite in which provinces and cities in favor of autonomy would come under a new autonomous region. Only five provinces with predominantly Moro populations voted for it.<sup>21</sup>

In 1992, upon the assumption of former military figure Fidel V. Ramos (FVR) to presidency, the MNLF was drawn into a new round of peace talks with the government. Ramos sought to outdo his predecessor by promising to explore means of widening the boundaries and authority of the autonomous region and by "taking Constitutional and legal steps to comply with all the provisions of the Tripoli Agreement."<sup>22</sup> In 1996, a peace agreement was signed between Misuari and Ramos providing for, among others, the creation of a transitional administration and a longer-term establishment of a regional autonomous government. The Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD)<sup>23</sup> was established as the transitional administrative structure with the primary role of supervising the implementation of the agreement over a three-year period. The SPCPD covered not just the five Moro provinces but fourteen provinces and nine cities of Mindanao. A major task of the SPCPD was to demonstrate to both Muslims and Christians the economic benefits of peace under the autonomous region by way of development funds channeled to the region and the encouragement of foreign investment. Nur Misuari was made chairman of the SPCPD. The SPCPD, however, was restricted in power, resources, and authority. In the end, whatever little influence it had was further obstructed by bureaucratic gridlock, legal disputes, and political opposition.

Again, before the second phase of the agreement (the establishment of a Regional Autonomous Government)<sup>24</sup> could be implemented, a plebiscite had to be held on 12 August 2001, purportedly to legitimize the increase of the boundaries of the ARMM from its current five provinces and a city.<sup>25</sup> And again, most areas of Mindanao and Palawan rejected Muslim self rule. Still, the chairman and founder of the MNLF Nur Misuari was installed as Governor of the ARMM. In November 2001, however, his

rule ended abruptly when he led a failed uprising that culminated in his capture in Malaysia and present incarceration in Laguna.

### *The Anti-terror campaign*

Since taking office in 1998, Former President Joseph Estrada demonstrated his reluctance to implement and support the 1996 Peace Agreement. He has been blamed as a major factor for the failure of the SPCPD. Estrada also took a non-compromising approach with the MILF and was responsible for the total war policy that wrought tremendous havoc on thousands of civilian lives in Mindanao in 2000. His reign was also associated with the emergence of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Basilan which claimed responsibility for the Dos Palmas hostage-taking in 2001 which local people believed was the motivation behind the Malaysian government's turning against Misuari.<sup>26</sup>

Before the ASG deteriorated into a kidnap-for-ransom gang and a terrorist organization rumored to have links with high officials in the military. Its core leaders who had been largely decimated by the military claimed themselves to be Islamic revolutionaries. They were young Moro idealists who were said to be disillusioned by the MNLF's surrender to the government.<sup>27</sup> Military intelligence, to justify its assaults on Sulu and Basilan Islands in search of ASG lairs, would hint at the group's connection with the Al Qaeda.<sup>28</sup> The February 2005 bombardment of Sulu Islands to stamp out the MNLF rebellion was pursued on the pretext that ASG forces were hiding there.

### *The continuing MNLF rebellion*

When high-ranking commanders turned their backs on Misuari and served the government instead, there was hope that the MNLF rebellion would be put to an end. The Council of Fifteen ousted Misuari in 2001 and chose to occupy seats in the ARMM. Prominent among these is Muslimen Sema of the Kutawato State Revolutionary Command, now Mayor of Cotabato City. For not joining this anti-Misuari conspiracy, military and government officials – and national media – (re)invented the word “renegades,” granting the Council of Fifteen “main MNLF faction” status and calling the field commanders who have remained loyal to Misuari “renegades,” and “an MNLF breakaway group.” Leading

this group is Ustadj Habier Malik who heads the MNLF Jabar Uhod Command which covers the eastern part of Jolo, and Khaid Ajibon, Chairman of Lupa Sug State Revolutionary Committee.

Dismayed at the Council of Fifteen's action, Commander Malik refused to talk against his former comrades and would rather blame the military and the President for bribing the MNLF top cadres. *Nabi nila in kumander sin MNLF katan. Four million.* “They had bought the MNLF commanders. At four million.” He dismissed the military operations as all for accomplishment reports and for the money making business of the military top brass. *In operation hipagkaw' record iban hikasin sin military.* Understand, he said, that those in high offices, had to work closely with those in the ground. *Hati kaw. Inda', nagsusud in parkala' ba taas iban ba babu'.*

Ustadj Habier Malik led the attack on the military brigade command post in Barangay Seit Poblacion on 06 February 2005. The offensive, which set off the siege on Jolo for nine days, was in retaliation for the killing of a Moro family perpetrated by AFP soldiers. On 01 February 2005 military soldiers strafed the house of the Padiwan family in Sitio Baunu Ice, Barangay Kapuk Punggul in the municipality of Maimbung, killing five of the seven occupants, including the Padiwan couple, their thirteen-year-old child Aldasir, another three-year-old child Aljismal, and a relative. The eldest son, fourteen-year-old Alsid, was spared because he got up early to sell native rice cakes. The other survivor, seven-year-old Almujoyal, was hit on the right hand and survived, but left the hospital against doctor's advice because of threats from military soldiers. The second child died later in a hospital. As this was not the first atrocity committed by military soldiers against civilians in recent time, the residents sought justice through the help of the MNLF. The battle that followed made Panamao and Indanan a target of an intensive military operation that caused residents to evacuate to the adjacent municipalities of Panglima Estino, Luuk, and Jolo. By the second week of February 2006, about 5,000 soldiers were deployed in the area. This included the 9th, 7th, and 4th battalions of the Marine Brigade, an infantry division of the army belonging to the 33rd, 35th and 54th IBs), and several units of the Air Force (Interview with Habier Malik, 02 February 2006).

Data gathered from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Provincial Office and the Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC-Sulu) disclosed that as of 24 March 2005, the

displaced was at 9,879 families or about 57,900 persons. Another NGO working with IDPs, *Balay*, reported that as of 09 June 2005, about 13,440 families composed of 85,532 persons were affected. To date, one evacuation center at Timbangan, Indanan remains open, sheltering fifteen families or about sixty-eight individuals while 1,586 families or about 8,407 individuals are still served outside. Up to the present, armed clashes between the AFP and Moro armed groups still continue to force thousands of civilians to leave their homes and farms. The number of deaths between the warring forces is much harder to account. The Southern Command (Southcom) placed their casualties at seventy-nine soldiers not counting the wounded, while MNLF estimated some 300 dead on the enemy side. Interviews with civilians also put the number of the dead on the military side by the hundreds, on the MNLF side at less than ten. *Magkahagad kam. Bukun san kapituman tagiyam in miyatay kanila. Giyatusan sa yan diyandi hadja ba Bwansa, umay pa lamud in ba hansipak.* "Listen. It could not be that only seventy-nine died on their side because here in Bwansa alone, a hundred died. And more died on the other side." The "other side" refers to Panamao where battles were fiercer. It was there that Brigadier General Dennis Villanueva, Commanding General of the 35<sup>th</sup> IB of the Philippine Army died.<sup>29</sup> When news of the general's death was broadcast, it was said that people shouted *Allahu Akbar* (God is great), like justice has been served for the death of the child in the Padiwan family as well as for other injustices suffered in the past in the hands of soldiers. There was likewise a sense of redemption, and a sense of gratefulness for the protection that the MNLF had provided the *bangsa*. A local resident spoke so: *Magsarangsulul kita amn pa MNLF nagbangbug katu. Bang umay na madayus iyan kita sin mga tau.* "We should be grateful there is still the MNLF to defend us. If not for them people would just trample us under their feet" (Interviews, February 2006).

While national media and military officials tend to downplay, if not deny, this claim to victory, local people generally feel the enemy has been beaten. Even children narrating their experiences of the February battles showed in their drawings soldiers who kept on falling down the hill. Commander Malik himself counted five dead on his side. In Bwansa, two MNLF cadres were killed, but according to residents these two committed a *parrang sabi*<sup>30</sup> and went after the retreating soldiers. Before

this act the two were said to have told people to please get their bodies because they felt that it was their time to die now.<sup>31</sup> People interviewed expressed no sense of loss for these two deaths because according to them, the two died a most noble death and had killed many enemies (Interviews, February 2006). The casualties on the AFP side were such that in an interview with Commander Malik he advised wives and families of Filipino soldiers from Luzon not to go to Mindanao (Interview, 02 February 2006). Residents are of the opinion that the AFP forces could have not entered Jolo without the collaboration of local government officials. A citizen of Panamao revealed that MNLF integers are being used by the military as assets to penetrate the MNLF (Interview, 02 February 2006). In an interview, MNLF Commander Khaid Ajibon said that they declared a "state of war" against the Philippine government not only in Sulu but also in other areas of operation of the MNLF in Mindanao (Interview with local media, February 2006).

For all the adversity that had come to pass in the history of the MNLF, what remains enduring seems to be the ordinary fighter's and the ordinary peasant's loyalty to *Maas*<sup>32</sup> *Misuari*. Bapa' Barjaya's idea of peace in the homeland, for instance, is attached with the jailed Misuari's freedom from imprisonment. *Bang di' makagawa' in Maas, in hulu masi sa'. Bang iyan makagawa' misan in Abu Sayyaf yan malawa' ra. Iban in military di' makapissuk bang hi Misuari ba gawa'.* "For as long as the Old Man is in prison, conflict is here to stay. But once he is released, even the Abu Sayyaf will be gone. And even the military will listen once Misuari is free."

### *The displaced*

Rather used to armed tension, thanks to the frequent sightings of military men and armed rebels roaming the countryside, not to mention bandit groups and local security forces of warring politicians, the people of Sulu Islands, particularly of Indanan and Panamao, were unusually distressed during the last military bombardment because they had been forcibly driven out of their homes. In the other military operations and armed fights, particularly those directed at Abu Sayyaf forces following the declaration of "total war" by former President Estrada in 2000, people managed to stock food and stayed in their houses as both soldiers and rebel forces just passed by. In the last war, they had been particularly overwhelmed by the size of the military battalions deployed

– from the original 3,000 to 5,000 troops by 15 February 2005 – which included Army, Marine, Navy units, and a company-size US trained Light Reaction Force (*Kalinaw*, March 2005). By 20 February 2005, or a good two weeks since hostilities broke out, more than 26,000 people were displaced. Affected were at least seven municipalities; namely, Panglima Estino, Jolo, Panamao, K. Caluang Karungdung, Parang, Patikul, and Luuk Camp Andres (see table below).

*Displaced persons in Sulu (as of 19 February 2006)*

Municipality	No. of Families	No. of Individuals
1. Panglima Estino Punay Poblacion	550	3,803
2. Jolo	119	721
3. Panamao Suh Poblacion	105	634
4. K. Caluang Karungdung	75	525
5. Parang Poblacion	555	3,815
6. Patikul	685	4,400
7. Luuk Camp Andres	600	3,000
8. Unaccounted		9,000
Total		26,000

Source: Provincial Civil Defense Office, Sulu

Help came from government offices, church groups, schools, and business groups nearby and, so much later, from NGOs. But at the height of the conflict the local branch of the National Food Authority (NFA) ran out of rice stocks. Transportation of available relief goods supply was moreover hampered by the ongoing fighting (*Kalinaw*, March 2005). Because relief came on the assumption that there was hunger, there was not much time for help groups to think about minimum dietary requirements of local people. For instance, one list of relief beneficiaries from the DSWD showed that goods were mostly made up of “seven kilos” of rice with canned goods and noodles.” Far from nutritious to begin with, these hardly made up the rural Taosug’s food basket. Staple food in Sulu for most inhabitants is *pangi*<sup>31</sup> and fish, but nowhere in the records of relief assistance did these items appear. It was months later before a water facility was figured out and so far no temporary sanitary toilets came with the temporary shelters.

Seemingly, the recipient unit in the food distribution is the nuclear family,<sup>35</sup> and considering the lack of knowledge of donor groups about local people and cultural practices, resource allocation might have been arbitrarily determined and, likely, disruptive of local culture.

Be that as it may, the amount of help that came would have not been procured if there had been not enough educative and advocacy activities done by NGOs and church groups on behalf of the Muslims. One report showed that by 09 June 2005, the total cost of assistance was at PhP7,352,795.00. The bulk of this amount, PhP3,735,320.00, was coursed through DSWD. NGOs contributed a total of PhP2,355,975.00, while LGUs donated a total of PhP1,261,500.00 (*Balay*<sup>36</sup> RDIP, n.d.). The same report stated that as of 09 June 2005 13,440 families composed of 85,532 persons have been affected, with a total of 1,601 or 8,475 individuals still being served by relief organizations. As of this writing, most of these displaced people have either moved into their relatives’ places or have rebuilt their houses in their old home villages.

### People’s perceptions on the war

During past military operations, as in the year 2000 when Estrada waged an anti-terror war and deployed military forces to cleanse Sulu and Basilan of ASG operatives, Panamao and Indanan residents did not evacuate. Soldiers would just pass by, just as the *tau guma* (rebels) would just pass by. The February battle was the first military operation staged in their own village, just a few hundred meters away from where their houses stood. *Magkari in sundalo sab di’ pagkaigan, saputika sin amu in nagbappen ini. Hangkan na laung ku pamasyalan sin sundalu pasal na bang yan makakari in contingent sin sundalu, ayuputun sin barrio.* An informant related that in that particular day the soldiers did not bother to set foot in the house of the barangay captain despite his son’s chasing after them and telling them to have coffee. He was trying to stop them from marching into their deaths because they were going to the direction which the residents knew to be the boundary the MNLF has set as their firing line. But they could not be detained and went directly ahead and in a couple of minutes the firing happened. *Amuru in pagbunu’ na ini di’ na mabaya’ humapit in sundalu bat iyapas namu’ madtu iban sin anak diyaaak na kami, ‘kadtua niyo laung na in sundalu painuma niyu naa mari kabawa.’ Na wayruun na. Di namu’ na maghuyud, na direct sila na... na naglubak na.* The

barangay captain believed that had the soldiers listened, nothing would have happened to them. *Pagka amun himapit na sila, wayruun da nagbappen way unu sabab. Hatiku maulung da isab in atu ha guwa.* “The rebels do pity them, I think” (Interview with “Manny,” February 2006).

Surprisingly, the residents of Bwansa seem to have come to accept war as something they have to live with. Asked what they think of the war, a respondent replied, “There’s nothing you can do. So we just look and watch. If they come to us we just talk it out with them. For as long as they don’t do us any harm. The trouble is when the military overtake the rebels, for that will be the end of them, for they will be ambushed, and that means war.” *Na way na sadja. Mangatud-ngatud na sadja kami. Dahun na namu’ na sadja magmiting bang sila dib da isab mag-inu-inu... Bang sila kaliyuhan gumuwa na amu in magbunu’ na sadja, sabab yaun sila hiyahapaaan.*

Forty six-year old former MNLF cadre Bapa Barjaya related that beginning 2000 alone, he had rebuilt his house four times already, as every time there was an operation the military would burn the houses. “They would set to fire all the houses they happened to pass by. And if they came upon cows, they would take them, too. Just this last evacuation (February 2005 operation) when they even took our shoes.” *Pagsunugun nakauna yadtu in katan kabayan bang mag-operation sila. Sa sukun sin kalabuyan nila sunugun nila ubusun. Bang awn abutan nila manga sapi’ dahun nila. Kita kaw ha pagpaguy ini pa manga sapatos namu’ piyagkanu’.*

Long alienated from mainstream development processes, many have grown cynical about current efforts at uplifting Lupa Sug. As far as the Moro struggle is concerned, many don’t see an end to it soon. Nor is an end necessary. A seventy-year old farmer from Sitio Talibang had this to say: “For an uneducated Taosug like me, no law can settle armed conflict to avenge the death of a relative. As you can see here, even those highly educated and big-time politicians take the law into their own hands and it did not make any difference in the end.” A forty-five year old widow seconded: “This is the world we had grown up with. We knew no other. This is something we have to put up with. The government program on peace and development—anything to do with peace and order does not interest us one bit.”

Government officials appear to be echoing these views. The DSWD Provincial Director of Sulu said: “These military operations, peace consultations, public hearings are all but an exercise in futility.” In Sulu, she further said, one has no business doing politics if he doesn’t have the money

(Interview with Ms. Maydelyn Bahjin, February 2006). Residents in Jolo said that the Brigade officials are actually the most powerful entities during election time. Not only were they given the duty to keep peace and order that elections may be held in this hot-spot country, they were also given the power to guard and switch ballot boxes (Interviews, February 2006).

It is thus not surprising that people feel hopeless towards ever getting any help from the authorities, be it in war or in peace. Asked whether they report violations committed by the military to any office, many said they don’t. If bad comes to worse, they just pack up and flee. *Uway na pagsumbung, magpaguy na hadja. Misan unu in kumugdan uway ra mahinang namu’. Mudtu kaw pamilitary di’ da kaw dapitan, gamman lumugay kumangi’ pa kita. Iban, di da hikagawa’ katu’ in kasabunnalan. Iban bang military ra in pagsumbungan uway ra lagi, marayaw pa kita nagduruhung.* “No more. Just evacuate. No matter what you do, there’s nothing that can be done. You go to the military and they will not hear your side, by and by they will turn against you. You go to others and they will just hush you up. The truth will not come out anyway. Rather than run to the military, better to sit it out and stare into space.”

Even government’s relief and rehabilitation operations for the evacuees are hardly appreciated. Asked what help has been given them at the height of the evacuation, people appeared unaware that there was any. Asked further what else may be done to minimize the impact of the war, they seemed indifferent. “We don’t know. It’s all up to you what help you can offer us. But this we ask from God, that may there be a little peace in this land. We wouldn’t ask for anything more but that. That we may able to look after our livelihood, be able to sleep well, then that will be a lot to thank for. That we may work our land, our coconut farms, our harvest...” *Inday baba.’ Bang ha biya’ kaniyu bang unu isab in hikatabang niyo kamu.’ Hangkan na ini in pangayyu’ namu’ pa Tuhan, pangayyu dinwaa bang manliminaw in hula.’ Misan uway na unu-unu basta kami makausaba na pabula’ makatug na kami didtu sa hula’ namu’ in yadtu malagu’ na pagsukulan namu’ sabab makausaba na kami sin lupa’ namu’, sin labing namu’, sin lanut namu’ bihan...*

For all the unrest prevailing in the area, the government’s only response appears to be military in nature. Said Ustadj Malik Habier: “Do not ever let the military handle the solution to this armed conflict, because we will always fight back!” People are however aware that all this violence and conflict in Sulu is just a symptom of a social restlessness that had deep historical and psychological roots (Interview with the

Municipal Secretary Hadji Nurl Tingkasan, 03 February 2006). Of late, rehabilitation and construction efforts have been in sway with the US Forces playing important role. But even these are resisted. A barangay captain, apparently unable to take the sight of *Milikan* (Americans) building the school and mosque their children and they would go to, took to task the governor overseeing the building work: *Mayta', di' mabinang sin kitaniyu in magpatindug sin iskul, sin masjid, sin mangga karundanan?* "Why can't we ourselves make the schools, the mosque, all these roads?"

### Children of war

Sessions with the children elicit views and experiences of the war, often focusing on their encounters with the soldiers and armed groups. It was startling to note that at their young age, they look at the their present predicament as normal as any other ordinary day. *Di' da isab magpangunu in sundalu kamu, Magpanglunsulan san kami mawn pa kampu nila magpanayam.* "The soldiers don't mind us. We sometimes go and play near their camp." They also said that neither the military nor the Moro armed groups harassed them. Their only worry is when they see military tanks and battalions of soldiers on foot patrol, equipped with high-powered arms passing by their area as OV-10 planes roam the skies. According to them, this is an indication that anytime soon they and their families will have to be on the alert.

Observance of soldiers' gear has also given some children certain ideas. A seven-year old boy expressed desire to be in the armed force someday. "I want to be a soldier, a police, or even a scout ranger, anywhere as long as there is pay!" *Mabaya' aku magsundalu, misan pulis atawa ranger, mabaya' aku basta awn gadji!*

Seemingly, the more serious problems affecting them are health-related. Many get sick and malnourished at the evacuation center. The parents are also more worried about the effects of war on their children's education. Because of the endless war exercises in their villages, children's attention are taken away from their schooling. Parents are afraid that the young children will grow up illiterate like them.

Many relief and rehabilitation NGOs offering psychosocial therapy for war victims are of the opinion that this long experience of war will have traumatic consequences for young children and will likely turn them into "war freaks" who "enjoy playing with toy guns." These NGOs

are moreover worried that children taking classes in the presence of the military men will suffer from strong psychological effects when they grow up (*Balay RDIP*, a photocopy, n.d.). This is such an effete attitude reflecting middleclass attitude towards wars and struggles. While there is no doubt that these children would be more comfortable and might be better educated without a war affecting their growth and psychological development, there is no definitive evidence to show that people who grew conscious of the reality of war in their early years have more psychological problems than those privileged with overprotected upbringing. The most immediate and visible effects on children, as far as war is concerned, is the closure of schools and non-delivery of health services. However, poor educational opportunities and health services have only been aggravated by war. Other problems endemic to local culture and politics have long retarded the educational development of children in Moro areas.<sup>37</sup>

### The February 2005 battles: Stories

#### *Ay-aykum Sayam*

We were on our way home from the Barangay Councilor's house when we met this woman grazing her cow. She looked beautiful with her waist-long curly hair and rounded body, though her face looked tired. We went to her and asked her if she were among those who evacuated at the height of the military operation in February 2005. She gave us a look that betrayed her doubt of our intentions. Perhaps because we told her we were Taosugs or perhaps it was because of my companion's talkativeness that she soon eased into conversation with us. When we asked her again to tell us about the battle between the Philippine Army and the MNLF Breakaway Group in February, a frown crumpled her face. Then she brought us to her house.

Stepping into the doorway, we came upon the remains of the February 2005 operations and Babu Addang herself broke into a storm of words. She said she went back to her abode to put some order into the house that she and her husband speedily left in the haste of the evacuation when she found out that the soldiers had set up camp there. *Pagkawn-kawn ko rang liyalarak na in lawang, in titimbakan nila piyallassut sa tandaman.* The house was a wreck, the soldiers' gun barrels jutting out of the window.

She entered, climbing the three-stepped ladder and greeted the strangers *Assalamu Alaikum*. One of the soldiers returned her greeting, though he apparently did not speak Taosug for he stammered “Ay-aykum sayam.” Another soldier addressed her in Taosug, complimenting her for the nice house she got and asking if she had an unmarried daughter. *Ina’ malingkat in bay mu, awn kaw anak budjang?* She told him none as all her children are married now, and then he asked if there was liniment or rubbing alcohol as he needed a massage. “I said, poor boy, when you leave my house don’t take our kitchen utensils. I was not able to carry them because I am sick with breast cancer, and they were too heavy for me.” She also saw that they used her big cooking pot and that they ate in the terrace. She told them not to take the pot when they leave and she then quitted the house.

The soldiers stayed in the barangay for more than a week, occupying the vacated houses. Civilians kept away for fear that they would be suspected of supporting the Abu Sayyaf Group or the MNLF. The soldiers practically turned their domiciles into boarding houses, taking liberty with everything they found. They also took off with the things they deposited at the public school – clothes, radios, pots and pans, and other valuables. The morning after they left, the residents went back to their homes. “You would think the devil himself came this way.” *Bunnal bunnal laung ku in manga sundalu ini paddam panas tuud.* “I said these were soldiers straight from hell. They took off with our water containers, the knives, the pots, my lamp, even the frying oil, and chicken eggs!” She and her husband bought food supplies because they thought they could stay in their house, like before, because the other years during military operations the soldiers just passed by the village. *Nagbi kami manga kapanyapan, kakaun, bahasa laung namu’ way ra san pag-ig, nagpamimi kami pagkaun namu’ supaya laung namu’ di’ na kami magkadtukadtu pa patabu’. May bu yaun pa sibuyas-sibuyas ku rung, Inda’, pa sukat-sukat, pa ginis-ginis na... bugas, lahing, lara-lara piyagkama.* They stocked food so they need not go to the town to buy their supplies during the war. They did not expect that the soldiers would take everything. “Even the onions, sugar, rice, pepper...” They even forced her clothes trunk open. *Manglangpas tuud! Manglangpas tuud in biya’ kanila... in nakaiyan na aku, bang hadja laung ku bukun awm pagbangbangan ta amun nakauri’ mayol laung ku biban, way lumingkat laung ku magsama-sam pa brigade, maglapal kita kita laung ku bibayan... kiyangatan mu na bang kita ini mayamasu’ na... pamanuk-manuk namu’ ba Inda’ bang kaw kamita’ sin bulbul ba kid-kid sin puunan sin*

*byabas yaun... alla apu’ ku bat way ba tuwan kiyapin! Magsarang sukul da kuman kami unway piyagdapugan in manga kabahayan namu.* “If you’ve seen the house after they left! Thieves, I said. If only we are not supporters of the mayor, we should like to report them to the Brigade Commander. When you are angry... who would not be angry? Coming upon your house like that, your chicken feathers scattered under that guava tree there... nothing left! I’m just glad they did not set fire to our house!” (Interview with Babu Addang, February 2006).

### *So you want to know who are the IPDs in Lupa Sug?*

When we asked our local guide Manny to find us a respondent who could share about her or his experience with armed conflict, he immediately brought up Bapa Barjaya’s name. Bapa Barjaya Baddang, according to Manny, got himself caught in the gunfight between government forces and local rebels that took place in Sitio Talibang, in the boundary of Barangay Karawan and Barangay Bwansa in Indanan.

We soon found out that Bapa Barjaya’s experience with war went as far back as 1973 when he was only in second year high school at Notre Dame of Jolo. He dropped out of school to join the MNLF, since all men young and old were anyway suspect to the military. Boys in their teens were going over to the MNLF camp, as they would rather die than get picked up and jailed for just being a Taosug Muslim.

Now forty-six, married twice with seven children and some grandchildren, Bapa Barjaya thinks that life has not changed a bit. “Evacuate here, hide there, just as before!” Only this time, instead of Nur Misuari, it’s Khaid Ajibon who is in command. It is however the same MNLF, and the same government they are fighting. *Wayruun tuud kami yan nakananam parasaban daing katagna’ ba parinta ini!* Never for once did this government lend us a little peace.

Bapa Barjaya’s family is well known in Sitio Talibang. They own some thirty-five hectares of land planted with coconut, abaca, and fruit trees. He said that if only there was enough peace to leave them at length at a time, his family would have been among those who got rich just from the produce of their lands. But the endless bombardment of their village did so much to destroy their livelihood. His own house had to be rebuilt at least four times now, having been burned down four times.

The house withstood the last bombing although it now leans slightly to one side. A bomb fell into the orchard next to it, creating a big hole on the ground and searing the fruit trees black.

The soldiers used bazooka, for there was rumor of ASG spotted in Sitio Talibang. His neighbors and other members of the family were quick to evacuate. For staying behind, Bapa Barjaya got strafed by the military and was hit by bullets in the abdomen. "I here. My remembrance of the last battle with the soldiers," he said, proudly showing us his scars. We asked Bapa why he chose to remain in his house when he knew that the place was being bombarded. "You see, child, I had to keep watch of our property."

Bapa further related that soldiers did not catch any Abu Sayyaf militia. *Uway ba Abu Sayyaf ha taasan ini! Duwal dakuman baha bang hat lumabay sab di namu' isab kaingatan bang ASG sila kannal namu' pagkabi ta madtu pa mga hansipak yaun.* "There are no Abu Sayyafs in these hills. Armed men did pass by that way or this way but Bapa Barjaya would not know if they were with the ASG. We thought they were just ordinary civilians, just like us, on their way to their farms."

Bapa Barjaya also told of the time when the Abu Sayyaf first began its activities in Lupa Sug and someone came up to him and offered him two million pesos just so he would allow them to stay in their village for a few days. He turned them down, told them he did not need two million pesos. He was more concerned for the safety of his family. *In waktu pagpa-awn sin Abu Sayyaf yadtu, awn nag-negotiate kaku', dumihil 2M dumuun humali-hali hadja. In agi ku, bukun ku kalagihan in alta', di' ku kann in kampung ku 2M pilak mabut pa hula ku laung ku. Di' aku mabayah sin bihadtu. Pag-ubus di' aku mabayah duunan.* At another time, Taosug strangers came to the sitio and slept in one of the farmers' houses. Bapa Barjaya went to the field and asked that same farmer about this, but was told by him that he did not know the *tau guma'* (outsiders) either. Until someone reported to the Brigade Commander that he was coddling armed rebels in his place. He had to go to the Brigade Commander himself to explain and inform him that he was able to make the armed men leave. The Brigade Commander thought him to be a rebel himself, or how else could he have asked the armed men to leave just like that. *Tinanong nila ako kung totoo may mga tao duon sa lupain namin. Inamin ko, oo, ikako, pero hindi ko ito kaagustuhan pumunta sila duon. Dagdag ko pa, napaalis ko rin ang mga taong ito.*

*Tinanong ako uli kung bakit ko napaalis. Ang suspetsa nila armado din ako. Sabi ko wala po talaga akong armas. Inulit ang tanong kung bakit ko napaalis ang mga di kilalang taong iyun nang ganun na lamang. "I told them (the military) that you don't deal with stubborn people in a stubborn way also or you end up killing one another. I told the Brigade Commander that I begged the strangers to leave because we civilians do not want to get involved in their war. I said to them that if they reconcile with government then I am willing to house them in the village even if they number up to a few hundreds. But for as long as they are at war with government, then I don't want them here in my place. So they left. But actually, they were just passing by. They were on their way to another mountain." Sabi ko naman, ang taong matapang at matigas ang ulo di mo makuha daanin sa patigasan din ng ulo. Magpatayan kayo nyan kung patulan mo ang katigasan ng ulo ng kabila at walang mangyayari. Basta ang sinabi ko sa mga taong ito—patawarin nyo ho ako, pero kaming mga sibilyan dito ayaw naming sumali sa gulo ninyo subalit kung kayo ay maki-reconcile with the government, kabit pa kayo by the hundreds pwede kayo tumuloy at mamalagi dito sa akin. Pero hangga't hindi pa kayo magkasundo with the government ayoko muna dito kayo mamalagi... kaya umalis na rin sila. Ang totoo nun dumaan lang sila papuntang kabilang bundok.*

Bapa Barjaya said that people in the village are actually used to seeing strange (armed) men in transit. The strangers were not doing any harm so they just let them be. They only encounter problems when soldiers on patrol looking after Abu Sayyaf men would come, because once the two parties cross path, it is the civilians, who are bound to suffer the encounter. *Yun nga lang pag may mga sundalo nagpapatrol o naghahabol ng sabi nilang mga ASG, at kung magpang-abutan sila tiyak kaming mga sibilyan ang unang madisgrasya!* But it is not only the rebels, said Bapa Barjaya, that have been sending them to evacuate. Clan wars common in Sulu islands have long been turning them into "war victims." *Kabit nga sa alitan ng mga magkalabang pulitiko, kami pa rin mga ordinaryong tao ang nabibiktima dagdag pa nito.*

"You want to know who are the IDPs here in Sulu and how many? I tell you, get the record of the entire population in Sulu, including our children and grandchildren, not counting those who escaped to Sabah, and you have the number of the IDPs that you want." *Aykawnaa Inda', kaa niyu na in record sin population sin Sug, sambil anak apu' namu', unway pa lamud in yadtu na ba mga Sabah!* "For ever since I can remember,

we never ran out of military operations, of *ridos*, political rivalries, encounters between military and any armed group. This has been our way of life here. Evacuating, moving from one barangay to another, and then moving back to our homes as soon as the fighting subsides. I think this has become our life. It has always been this way. And if I may say it, none of us residents of this province can claim his or her families were not internally displaced for repeatedly experiencing the same situation again and again and again. Look at what has become of our properties, of our economic activities? I myself did not anymore want to count the number of times we built and rebuilt our houses, our farms. *Di' ku na hika-istori, sa' atura niyu rakuman in parasaban namo*. Need I tell you more? Just look at our condition" (Interview with Bapa Barjaya Baddang, February 2006).

### *In Lupa Sug, Lupag Sug da*

Kaka Jamail has been working in the local government for almost twenty years now. He had been witness to the many wars and armed conflicts staged in Lupa Sug – whether they be between AFP soldiers and local fighters or between rival warlords and local politicians. His position in the local government, ironically, has made him lose his faith in any concept of peace and order or local governance for that matter. "If I tell you what I know," he told us, "they're quite a lot. But I have to look out for myself, and I have to protect my constituency." *Bang ku hibayta kaniyu in kaingatan ku, mataud. Sab hiyallian ku in baran ku iban raayat ku*.

Lupa Sug will always be Lupa Sug, he said emphatically. *In hula' ini, bukan biya' sin hula' dugaing. Misan da tu adlaw ampa iyukab kakitaan mu awn kasambuhan. Sa' in Lupa Sug, Lupag Sug da*. Other towns and cities grew and developed like the rest of the world, but Lupa Sug is unlike any other. One need not go far to look. Zamboanga, he cited for one, had in only three days become a commercial city. *Di' na kita magpalayu', mawn na hadja kita pa-samboangan. Way parinta dayndi ha Lupa Sug, magkahaqad kaw*. But in Sulu, there is no government, no law and order. *Bang awn kakitaan mu duwa military najil ampa kaw magkahaqad awn parinta*. "If you can find two soldiers in jail, then you may say there is law and order". And in times of war, no mayor, governor, congressman is powerful enough to do anything as it is the military who is in control."

*In gubnol, mayol, kongrisman, bang satu awn bunu' unay mabinang pasal under control ra sin military*. Deployed therein to keep law and order, the military is apparently perceived by most residents as a power broker engaged in some other job than peacemaking. During election, candidates who win are bound to lose if they aren't close enough to the General. The Brigade connives with the Comelec to direct the ballot results.

One big bone of contention that can bring on violent confrontations between rival political clans is the IRA.<sup>38</sup> *Hambuok pagbubunuan di ha Sug among politicians na in IRA na yan. Na, magkahaqad kaw kaku', pagpatayan tuud san in IRA*. "Believe me, child, they will kill and die over that IRA" (Interview with Kaka Jamail, February 2006).

### *Hikasin sin military*

Ustadj Habier Malik, Commanding Officer of the MNLF Jabar Uhod Command in the eastern part of Sulu, and MNLF Central Committee Member, led the initial attack on the military camp at Barangay Seit, Panamao, Sulu on 06 February 2005. The offensive lasted for nine days, counting as casualty his residential compound in Barangay Bitanag, 700 meters away from the crossing where an army detachment stood. The military reported this to media as his camp. The exchange of fire burned fifteen houses and four mangosteen trees in the compound. Other affected areas included barangays Seit Lake Poblacion, Tanduh-Tanduh, Kulay-Kulay, and Tayungan.

It was the military, said Commander Malik, who started the war, in violation of the peace agreement. *Sila in timagna. Liyarak nila in agreement*. On the pretext of going after the ASG, the military has been fielding its forces to wipe out the MNLF. In 2002, the military violated the peace agreement when it attacked an MNLF camp killing seven men. On the same day, another attack was also made on another MNLF camp killing one man. "The military will always justify their operations in our area on the pretext of ASG presence. But we, Inda', only fight for our *bangsa*."

The military, Commander Malik said, had also bought MNLF provincial commanders, at four million pesos each. And the war in Sulu is not likely to stop in the immediate future. *In operations hikasin sin military. Pila kumu' in hambuok panglu' sin M14? PhP28,50 each. In anti-tank PhP9,000.00. Plus in manga panglu' iyan pagbihun namu' da isab ha military*.

“The military makes money from war. How much is a bullet of an M14? PhP28.50 each. An anti-tank mortar shell is PhP9,000.00. Plus we also buy bullets from the military” (Interview with Commander Malik, 02 February 2006).

### Some updates and analyses

*Walang ibang intensyon ang pagdating ng mga tropang Amerikano kung hindi matulungan kayo na maiangat ang ating pamumuhay sa kabirapan (There is no other intention with the arrival of American troops, except to help you lift your lives out of poverty).*

- Marine Brigadier General Ben Dolorfino

The conflict in Sulu Islands – and the entire Mindanao for that matter – appears to be a long way yet, despite the continuing clamor for peace and the broadening peace movement that desires it. NGOs, relief organizations, and conflict transformation agenda notwithstanding, Lupa Sug appears to be wired up for more battles – if the voices of those who cherish the land most are to be heard. Though the prospect may be grim, it is however closer to the truth than what most government spokespersons and church-based NGOs can say.

### *The Arroyo government and the Southcom*

Adamant in her project of installing peace in Mindanao, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) continues to push for her peace agenda using all resources at her disposal. While fielding generals to run after what she likes to call “MNLFF renegades” on the pretext of going after Abu Sayyaf, her government resorts to bribery to get ex-MNLFF commanders to support her and lend legitimacy to her “peace process.” This carrot-and-stick policy is no different from Marcos’ strategy in post-Tripoli period when he gave former MNLFF commanders business concessions and lucrative posts in government.

On the second week of November 2005, Indanan and Panamao once again figured in another war when the combined forces of the Philippine Marines (PM) and the Scout Rangers of the 53<sup>rd</sup> IB of the Philippine Army (PA) made another operation against “terrorist elements.” Started in late afternoon of 11 November 2005, the firefight affected five MNLFF controlled municipalities of Sulu; namely, Marang,

Talibang, Pansul, Bakud, and Kagay (MNLFF Statement, 17 November 2005). The war displaced families which numbered some 1,273 or at least 7,638 persons. This would increase to almost 10,000 after an Air Force plane and military choppers dropped flyers warning the people of impending fullscale military operations. The flyers, written in Taosug bore pictures of military hardware (MCPA, 02 December 2005). The operation was justified by the AFP as part of the campaign to clear the islands of “remnants of the Abu Sayyaf leadership,” a claim everyone else but government and the military could not accept. In a letter to GMA, the Bangsamoro National Congress, a Moro multisectoral alliance headed by Tawi-Tawi Governor Almarim Tillah, affirmed that the only group operating in Sulu is the MNLFF. MNLFF Secretary-General for Internal Affairs Ustadz Moshir Ibrahim himself testified that the fighting started some 500 meters away from the MNLFF state chairman Khaid Ajibon’s camp, which was recognized by the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) as an MNLFF camp, and under agreement that no military men, not even the Philippine National Police (PNP), can visit without prior understanding and arrangement with the MNLFF. Father Dioni Cabillas of the MCPA said that as far as Mindanao is concerned, “the only clear and present danger... is not the legitimate liberation groups like the MNLFF but the government’s sabotage of peace” (MCPA, December 2006).

Even as military tactics are regularly employed, diplomacy is not abandoned. Three months prior to the attack on Sulu, the MNLFF-GRP Peace Working Group (PWG) was officially launched in Jolo, Sulu. An initiative with foreign funding,<sup>39</sup> the PWG is participated in by the Provincial Government of Sulu, the MNLFF, the AFP-PNP, and leading members of the civil society. Recently, the Southcom in Zamboanga, in cahoots with the Office of the President, invited other MNLFF commanders and fighters to a dialogue with military officials in the region over the yet unfinished work of integrating the MNLFF cadres still unaccommodated in the AFP and the PNP structure. This invitation has been apparently rejected by the MNLFF rebels, as the sporadic fighting with AFP soldiers would indicate. The Southcom officials, as what locals generally know, stands to profit from both war and peace in Sulu Islands, but most especially from war and war exercises occasioned by the presence of the high-logistics US forces.

### *The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)*

In May of this year, an OIC delegation visited key Muslim provinces and cities in Mindanao to assess the progress of the 1996 peace accord signed between the then president FVR and MNLF Commander Nur Misuari. The delegation went home with a pronouncement that the peace accord is a failure. The powerful Muslim organization likewise consistently rejected the Philippine government's application for observer status in the Muslim countries Conference (Sunstar, 24 June 2006). A loyal supporter of the Muslim struggle, the OIC has consistently supported the leadership of Nur Misuari and had granted the MNLF permanent observer status in the pan-Islamic organization.

The Arroyo government will have to deal with this body in handling armed rebellion in Mindanao and in dealing with Nur Misuari because of the powerful international pressure it wields. To date the OIC continues to support efforts to implement the 1996 MNLF-GRP Peace Agreement and calls for a tripartite meeting between the OIC, GRP, and the MNLF to review the implementation and determine the modalities for a new joint monitoring committee, appeals for the release of Misuari, and calls for the MNLF's unification with the MILF.<sup>40</sup>

### *The US forces and the Balikatan exercises*

Between 06 February and 06 March 2006, *Balikatan* exercises were held in Sulu aimed at enhancing US role in securing the province from terrorist threats and enhancing the capabilities of Filipino troops. A series of military maneuvers was jointly undertaken by Filipino and American soldiers to improve coordination and combat readiness of the two forces and enhance security relations between the US and the Philippines. The *Balikatan* is part of the agreement entered into between the US and the Philippines under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Rejected in more vigilant cities in other parts of Mindanao,<sup>41</sup> the VFA has been strongly defended by the military and accepted by local business and politicians in Zamboanga, Basilan, and Sulu as good in combating terrorism. In Basilan, it has been credited for stamping out Abu Sayyaf activities. Brigadier General Raymundo Ferrer went to the extent of

saying that the scrapping of the VFA, as called for by certain segments of society,<sup>42</sup> "will surely paralyze our efforts to upgrade the capabilities of our soldiers" (Manila Times, 23 January 2006).

In Jolo, the one-month "humanitarian mission" of the US forces had been made possible by the cooperation of local government officials. Sulu Governor Benjamin Loong, for one, is one of its staunch supporters.<sup>43</sup> For all good intent and purposes, there is general consensus that the *Balikatan* in Sulu is part of a war/peace strategy of the Philippine government in cooperation with the US to fight terrorists, which include all rebel groups. The deployment of US military forces in Sulu Islands for humanitarian assistance and civic projects comes with the training, equipment, and intelligence information assistance to the AFP in their combat operations against armed groups operating in the area. If it is any comfort to the inhabitants of the islands, at least "the real intention of the US forces are clear to the MNLF" (<http://www.newsflash.org/2004/02/h1/h103582.htm>).

### *The Moro Islamic Liberation Front*

Notably absent in the Sulu Islands, the MILF is a strong presence in other parts of Mindanao, particularly in the provinces of Maguindanao and North Cotabato. In other Moro populated provinces it has a wide base of support from which it collects *sadduqah*<sup>44</sup> from sympathizers. While MILF did emerge as the stronger force, especially when it fought an intense war in 2000, it failed to get the OIC recognition as representative of the Bangsamoro people. Moreover, its close links with fundamentalist Islam has made it unpopular to certain segments of the Moro society, as well as the Christian sectors. At ground level, MILF followers like to say that there is basically no difference between the MNLF and the MILF as they fight the same *jihad* and belong to one Muslim community. In practical terms, however, unification of the two forces remains a long way yet, as development policies often put them in adversarial positions. For instance, jobs, livelihood projects, government posts, and economic concessions that privileged MNLF integreees served to marginalize and weaken MILF forces.

### *Moro politicians and the traditional elite*

People of Indanan and Panamao are wont to say that military adventures and US intervention in the Sulu Islands would not have been possible without the collaboration of local politicians. MNLF's Habier Malik himself agrees so: *Nagsusud in parkala' ba taus iban ba babu.* During the February humanitarian mission, despite resistance by barangay officials to Balikatan, the governor of Sulu himself took to the US forces' defense. *Supaya di na kitaniyu kabunitan, sumanyang pa in dairu natu.* But despite all this claim to improving the people's economic condition, there is consensus among local people that the US presence in the Islands is far from benevolent, and no less than the Moro politicians are aware of this.

Traditional Moro politicians, Mindanao history would show, have always been the American and Philippine governments' ally in its counterinsurgency projects. During the American period, Moro elite readily succumbed to US policy of attraction via the *pensionado*<sup>45</sup> program. In Marcos' time, many Moro traditional politicians and ex-MNLF commanders accumulated wealth and power by serving Marcos. Under the present dispensation this policy of bribing local powers – including former rebel commanders – to weaken insurgent forces is very much on the swing. In the capital town of Jolo and elsewhere in the province, it is common knowledge that high-ranking military officials would have not gotten rich from the underground economy of the south (including smuggling and kidnapping) if not for intimate link with local politicians.

With the pouring in of support from the international community, including big financial institutions and Church and civic organizations, government officials are highly visible in many peace dialogues, peace covenants, and like conflict settlement activities. Traditional conflict mediation structures such as the Council of Elders are even exploited to the hilt to lend success to this foreign-funded projects. NGOs, instead of critiquing and giving these multi-directed activities a critical perspective, seemingly have jumped on the bandwagon and adapted themselves into the company of government officials, working closely with the AFP, the PNP, and other local players to further legitimize all these processes.

### *Mindanao NGOs and peace advocates*

Sulu has been of late a host not only to the humanitarian mission of the US forces, but to a parade of visitors coming from INGOs and local social development agencies committed to promoting peace and introducing economic development. Especially after the 1996 Peace Agreement between the MNLF and GRP, a procession of donor agencies, notably headed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United States Assistance for International Development (USAID), worked with local NGOs and people's organizations (POs) to carry out peace and development projects. Most of these were infrastructure projects and livelihood for MNLF integreees. An independent impact evaluation is yet to be undertaken as regards the poverty alleviation component of these projects, but based on current situation and local perceptions, suffice it to say that not much has trickled down to the poorest of the poor.

Following the February 2005 war, NGO intervention in the Sulu Islands has greatly focused on relief and rehabilitation. While many of local development agencies do recognize that poverty alleviation remains an important agenda and is blamed for the continuing restlessness in the rural areas, many of the ongoing projects have no clear answer as to the structural obstacles that impede peace and development work. Improved roads, rural electrification, and water facilities, for the most part, have helped the business sector more than the basic farming and fishing sectors. And safe motherhood projects and day care services still have to reckon with culture-related hindrances.

For all their good intents and purposes, peace advocacy work and church-initiated dialogue projects hardly go beyond calling for "cessation of hostilities" and providing relief assistance to war victims and are far from addressing the structural impediments to their hoped-for peace and development. Most NGOs are also run by Good Samaritans from other faiths and are not knowledgeable about the local milieu. Often fielded by INGOS with predetermined peace agenda – and often with inflexible structures and policies – they are in Moro areas mostly only during crisis periods, as in war outbreaks, to distribute goods, talk peace, and carry out welfare missions. Understanding local history and politics, much more sympathizing with local perspective, is beyond their ken, thus, their inability to stimulate and participate in local action. No wonder that community organizing work and capability-building

programs, for failing to reckon with the sources of people's cultural resistance, often look like artificial structures set up by development NGOs and disappear as soon as project term and funding end. Instead of effecting the desired development, outsider-originated initiatives often only succeed in corrupting the local environment.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusions and recommendations

The situation in the Sulu Islands is by no means an isolated case. In many parts of Mindanao, war remains a continuing reality, and similar struggles for peace and development are waged. But whether the GMA government will succeed in delivering its promise of stamping out rebellion is a foregone conclusion.

We do agree that the attainment of peace in these areas is desirable, just as we agree that there is an imperative to integrate the minority and the marginalized peoples into the mainstream of the development process. We desire to see our children resume school and see ordinary people pursue gainful employment peacefully. But against these wishes, and after listening from the people of Indanan and Panamao, we too know that rebellion and armed conflict will stay on for a longer time in our country.

Below are some notes and recommendations which people engaged in peace building and rehabilitation efforts in Sulu might find useful.

1. Relief and rehabilitation work and emergency responses should try to approximate the needs of the local population. Lack of sensitivity to local culture (e.g., consumption needs) will reinforce people's prejudices against the impertinence of donor agencies, whereas appropriate response will bridge the psychoemotional gap between donor groups and receiving groups and will most likely make the latter more communicative about their sentiments and needs.
2. While IDP status is temporary, the need for water and toilet facilities extends beyond evacuation period. Donor agencies might do better by providing basic health facilities during, as well as after, war. Help groups, in particular, may also be of more help if they begin to work with the displaced beyond just giving away food rations and medicines. This might include carrying on with some of the

productive and social activities disrupted by war (e.g., such holding classes for young children, carpentry work for men, mother's health sessions, etc.)

3. NGOs and activists in the peace alliance groups should assert themselves more by giving the formation a critical perspective and voicing people's demands to address long-term problems. Most peace projects consist in building roads, mosques and schools that give short-term jobs to a few men and food-vending activities for women. These do not address demands for access in the employment and opportunity structures.
4. War has gendered effects, and in many armed conflicts women are made hostage by warring groups. In the 2000 anti-terror war, there were rumors of rape committed by soldiers against local women. NGOs engaged in documentation work might start looking into this aspect. Along this line, it might also be worthwhile to look at women's participation in the local resistance movement. Contrary to popular notions, women are not just passive victims and active peace advocates. Many a rebellion has been fought with women's active collaboration.
5. There is a need to reassess relief and rehabilitation work and what has been the impact of capital infusion via development NGOs in poor rural areas like the Sulu Islands. There is an observation that local people tend to view foreign and outsider help with distrust and contempt. This indicates that local people must have not felt anything beneficial from all this. Relief organizations are all over Mindanao and have been blamed for fomenting dependence among beneficiary groups. It might be better if research and human rights documentation work that reflect people's views and demands is strengthened. The lack of research, in particular, might be responsible for the lack of critical perspective and the failure to give the peace movement a strategic direction.
6. Besides psychosocial therapy and distribution of dolls and teddy bears, children in evacuation centers may be better served with programs that focus on their health and nutrition needs. Alternative learning activities should be put in place, if possible, in coordination with the Department of Education (DepEd).

7. Demands for peace are mostly centered in urban centers close to media and also tend to reflect government agenda. Most advocacy groups, moreover, are based in the cities and only come to the war-afflicted areas during fact-finding missions. Representation of people's voices and local perspective should come from the local area itself. People who have lived the armed conflict seem to have a deeper and broader understanding of it and tend to look for solutions that are long-term. Efforts should be made to encourage local participation in the (political) articulation of local problems. This might mean putting up alternative communication facilities not controlled by the establishment.

### Glossary

- Babu* – Taosug for Auntie, respectful address for an elderly woman.
- Balikatan* – Filipino, shoulder-to-shoulder; a series of annual joint military exercises aimed at improving combat planning and coordination between Filipino and American soldiers.
- Bajan* – Once sea nomads, this non-Muslim group belonging to the Sama tribe in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi Islands had since been sedentarized and are found all over the Philippines, subsisting on marginal fishing, food vending, and street begging.
- Bangsa* – Race, nation, people, community.
- Bapa* – Taosug for Uncle, respectful address to an elderly man.
- Dar-ul Islam* – A geographical territory where the laws of Islam are enforced and leadership is in the hands of Muslims; also Islamic brotherhood, Islamic solidarity.
- Datu* – Taosug, title given to a local chief or headman under a sultanate.
- hikasin* – Taosug, something to make money out of.
- Inda'* – Taosug, term of affection for a younger girl.
- indio* – Spanish, Filipino natives.
- jihad* – Arabic, holy war, or more broadly, struggle.
- kaffir* – Arabic, unislamic, heathen; loosely, referring to Christian and western ways and practices.
- Kaka* – Taosug, respectful address to an older brother or sister.
- Lupa Sug* – The Taosugs' name for their homeland Sulu islands.
- madrasah* – Islamic school.

- Milikan* – Taosug, American; white man.
- parinta* – Taosug, government; also law and order.
- Panglima* – Traditional title of a local chief or headman.
- parrang sabil* – Taosug tradition, an act of martyrdom, a self-sacrifice, for a noble cause.
- Samboangan* – Taosug, local name for Zamboanga (which traditionally referred to the entire Zamboanga Peninsula, including Zamboanga Sur, Zamboanga Norte, Zamboanga City and the Sibuguey Province).
- Sangguniang Bayan* – Legislative council in the municipal level.
- Sultan* – Title given to a sovereign ruler of a Muslim empire.
- snysuy sin kamaasan* – Taosug, stories told by old people.
- tau gwa'* – Taosug, literally, outsiders or strangers. Local people's ascription of rebels not coming from their own community.
- ukay-ukay* – Second-hand clothes sold on bargain.
- uttara* – A strong north wind.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This research had been conducted for Hags Incorporated and Toyota Foundation. Data gathering for this research was undertaken in February 2006. Some of the data processing had been mainly done by Rizalina Tiannok.
- <sup>2</sup> Jolo is one of the island municipalities of Sulu Islands and the capital town of Sulu Province. The many wars it hosted throughout the last three decades have also virtually made it a rebel capital.
- <sup>3</sup> Known to the national media as the MNLF Breakaway Group (MBG), this is composed of the eight MNLF commanders and followers who refused to join the MNLF Council of Fifteen that ousted Misuari in 2000. They have been invariably referred to by military officials and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) as "renegades" after the supposed "ouster" of Misuari. Its leaders however insist that on the contrary, they are the main faction of the MNLF not the fifteen-man council that joined government.
- <sup>4</sup> On 6 February 2005, a joint offensive of some 500 MNLF and Abu Sayyaf elements attacked an Army outpost in Panamao town, Sulu.
- <sup>5</sup> A highly influential entity in the peace movement in Mindanao is the Bishop Ulama Forum (BUF), a conservative to moderate organization of religious leaders which works closely with the Office of the Presidential Assistance for the Peace Process or OPAPP.

<sup>6</sup> Some examples are the works of Soliman Santos (*Peace zones in the Philippines: Concept, policy and instruments* published in 2005), Karl Gaspar (*People journeying together for peace* published in 2001), and the Catholic Relief Services (*Mga Pamalandong sa pagmugna ug pagpalungtad sa mga sona sa kalinaw: Mga leksiyon gikan sa Mindanao, Pilipinas*, undated).

<sup>7</sup> Well celebrated peace zones include Malabang in Lanao Sur, Maladeg in Sultan Gumander also in Lanao del Sur, and Dinas in Zamboanga del Sur. The Malabang success story has been jeopardized by the killing of the Irish parish priest, Father Rufus Halley, the key person in the interfaith dialogue in the town. The Maladeg area, which had been declared by the Anton Family as a peace zone, would later be reported as a turf of the warlord Anton who virtually owns all of the land in the area. At the height of anti-terror war, Maladeg became the military's launching pad in bombarding MILF strongholds (see Abreu 2005). The Dinas interfaith dialogue has been recently buttressed with the formation of a Council of Elders composed of local politicians and religious leaders from the Christian and Moro population, but it appears helpless against the continuing violence between armed forces operating in the area. The latest of this was a sabotage operation aimed at the USAID Coastal Resource Management program (managed by the mayor's office and guarded by ex-MNLF combatants as *Bantay Dagat*) which turned into a "sea encounter" that killed five people including three MILF men, one woman and a child. In retaliation for these deaths, the vice mayor of Dinas, who was also the CRM focal person, was ambushed by relatives of the MILF. These violent confrontations would be later localized by the newly formed Dinas Council of Elders as a *rido* or clan feud (See Alojamiento 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The SZOPAD includes the ARMM and selected areas in Regions Nine and Twelve.

<sup>9</sup> Composed of Rizalina Tiannok and Sheba Harun, both Taosugs. They were assisted by local guides.

<sup>10</sup> Reason cited by the Department of Social Welfare and Development's Provincial Director was security of the victims (February 2006).

<sup>11</sup> There had been stories about sexual violence committed by Philippine soldiers against local women especially following the "war against terrorists" pursued by the Estrada administration. Local opinions are rife that the casualties the military suffered, and particularly the death of a high-ranking military official, was just compensation for all the injustices committed against the Taosug people, including women victims. It was however noted that while interviews with local residents strongly hinted at rape incidents, people were hesitant to openly discuss it owing to the general belief that family honor has to be protected (Interviews, February 2006).

<sup>12</sup> In 1898, Spain ceded the entire Philippine archipelago, including Mindanao

and Sulu, which it still had not fully occupied, to the United States, through the Treaty of Paris (Magdalena 1990, 16).

<sup>13</sup> This data forms a piece of Tawi-Tawi's oral tradition or *stisyay sin kamaasan* (Taosug phrase, meaning, stories told by old people).

<sup>14</sup> Agriculture at the time of the reign of the sultanate was moreover largely maintained by slave labor not by native commoners.

<sup>15</sup> Minoritization of the indigenous populations of Mindanao has been attributed mainly to "Christianization" which had been effected by conversion of native inhabitants into the Christian faith by the resettlement policy.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, when Governor Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuerra led an expedition of eighty vessels to Sulu in 1638, he had with him 600 Spanish and 3,000 Filipino troops. In 1875, Misamis Governor Jose Caraballo organized 600 Filipino volunteers for the invasion of Jolo (Magdalena 1990, 15).

<sup>17</sup> Early Chinese immigrants who established themselves in the region as traders, businessmen, and landowners married locals, converted into the Muslim religion, adopted and assimilated into the local Taosug culture.

<sup>18</sup> Figures are unavailable for the actual number of people who moved from Jolo to the south during this period, but they had to be in the thousands and must account for the rapid growth of the populations of Tawi-Tawi communities in the 1970s and the 1980s, especially Bongao and Sitangkai.

<sup>19</sup> By then hostilities resumed between MNLF and government forces, although the failure of the Tripoli Agreement left many in the rank and file confused as Marcos went ahead with his own version of autonomy, appointing former MNLF commanders to top position in the Autonomous Regions of Nine and Twelve. Following the failed talks Misuari himself went on exile in Libya.

<sup>20</sup> The Nur Misuari-Hashim Salamat split took place as early as 1977 with Misuari's signing of the Tripoli Agreement. Salamat would later ground his decision to form another group on ideological differences, dissociating MILF's Islamic orientation from what his group perceived to be Misuari's affinity with secular ideologies.

<sup>21</sup> Despite MNLF's call to boycott the plebiscite, the Aquino government went ahead with establishing an Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which structure still stands up to the present.

<sup>22</sup> Government position in the Jakarta Talks on 14-16 April 1993.

<sup>23</sup> A radical provision of the Peace Agreement which took many by surprise was the reintegration of thousands of MNLF fighters into the AFP and the PNP.

<sup>24</sup> This involves investing it with its own executive council, legislative assembly, and representation in the national government, as well as the power to raise tax and establish a regional security force, education system, and Islamic court system.

<sup>25</sup> The five provinces are Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Lanao del Sur, all with a majority Muslim population. The lone city is the Islamic City of Marawi in Lanao Sur.

<sup>26</sup> Malaysia, and particularly the Sabah State, had long been a supporter of the MNLF-led struggle. The kidnapping of Malaysian tourists in Dos Palmas which was perpetrated by Taosug armed men affiliated with the Abu Sayyaf took place at a time when the US-led anti-terror campaign (following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC) listed the MNLF and the MILF as terrorist organizations. It was also the time when the AFP and the Philippine National Police (PNP), in its anti-terror drives, were not making any distinction between the kidnap-for-ransom Abu Sayyaf Group and the other (revolutionary) armed forces in Mindanao.

<sup>27</sup> This side of the Abu Sayyaf Group has not been given media mileage, but is a generally accepted stories among local peoples and Moro intellectuals, particularly in Zamboanga, Sulu, and Basilan.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Qaeda is an international alliance of terror organizations founded and funded by Osama bin Laden and other Arabs who were veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. It claimed responsibility for the infamous orchestrated attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. – events which came to be known as 9/11.

<sup>29</sup> Editor's note: Dennis Villanueva, a member of the Philippine Military Academy Class 1986, was a lieutenant colonel commanding the Fifty-third Infantry Battalion of the First Infantry Division of the Philippine Army at the time of his death. The misinformation that erroneously promoted him to generalship might have been wishful thinking to raise the value of the victory represented by the soldier's death in battle.

<sup>30</sup> An act of martyrdom, a self sacrifice for a noble cause. The practice is both Taosug folk tradition and Islamic in origin and has throughout history been a motivating factor in suicide bombings and like political actions.

<sup>31</sup> In Taosug tradition, a fighter who commits a *parrang sabil* has to first undergo a ritual of purifying himself, in the knowledge that he is going to his certain death.

<sup>32</sup> Taosug, meaning the Old Man, an address of respect and reverence, referring to Nur Misuari.

<sup>33</sup> Most of the rice relief were also obtained from NFA warehouses which were of poor quality and in many instances in past relief operations in Mindanao had been blamed for the evacuees' suffering from stomach pains and diarrhea.

<sup>34</sup> This tree, with heart-shaped leaves in spirals, reaches a height of eighteen meters. Its flowers grow in spikes and are green in color. Its large, brownish, pear-shaped fruits grow in clusters.

<sup>35</sup> This can be deduced from the number of persons listed as co-beneficiary of the household head that received the seven kilos of rice which were three or four.

<sup>36</sup> This document from *Bala* had been sent to us by mail without bibliographical notes whatsoever. Owing to time constraints, we had no opportunity to trace the data source.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, resistance of parents to enroll their children in *kaafir* schools, taboos related to reproductive ailments and attitudes about Muslim female bodies, and especially warlordism and Moro patronage system that divert large amounts of social services money into the private coffers of local politicians.

<sup>38</sup> Internal Revenue Allocation. This is the local government unit's share from the national tax equitably computed from the amount the LGU brought into the national coffers.

<sup>39</sup> The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue or HD Centre, an INGO based in Switzerland, is one of the international organizations supporting the peace process in Mindanao, particularly the PWG project (<http://www.hdcentre.org/Philippines-MNLF-Activities>).

<sup>40</sup> To this effect the OIC had chosen to recognize the MNLF over the MILF as the representative of the Bangsamoro struggle and supports the leadership of Nur Misuari.

<sup>41</sup> Strongest opposition came from Davao where the local chief executive and legislators united in debunking the Agreement as politically costly. Twenty two of its twenty-five councilors signed a resolution opposing the holding of the Philippine-US Balikatan Military exercises in the city (*Bulathat*, 26 September 02 October 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Opposition to the VFA has been raised on ground related to Philippine sovereignty and freedom from foreign intervention. Protest was especially strong following the rape of a Filipina committed by US servicemen in November 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Questioned by a barangay captain why the need for the presence of American soldiers when the people of Jolo themselves could very well do all the road construction and mosque and school building, the Governor answered: *Supaya di na kitaniyu kahunitan, sumanyang pa in दौरا natu* "That we may not have to burden ourselves any further, on top of improving our lives, too" (Interviews with Jolo residents, February 2006).

<sup>44</sup> It comes from the word *salaqa*, meaning to be truthful; the noun is *Sidq*. *Sadaqa* is derived from *Sidq*, meaning that the person is giving charity to help the poor and needy. This action only confirm the person's true devotion and service to Allah.

<sup>45</sup> Part of US government policy of improving education in the Philippines and in Mindanao, the *pensionado* program offered scholarships in the United States for the sons and daughters of elite Moro families.

<sup>46</sup> Included here are local Moro organizations and foundations that while run by "insiders" (local people), represent outsider interest and foreign setups.

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