

THE SITUATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN SOUTHERN MINDANAO

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To our brothers and sisters in the lowlands:

As tribal peoples, we have always considered that we come from the same roots and that there is no difference between you and us, Lumads. The only difference is that we have preserved, and are trying to preserve, our indigenusness, our tradition and culture.

Indigenous peoples have always been considered ignorant, mountain people, uneducated and savage. With the work of solidarity-building, specially through our advocacy in PASAKA and SAGIP, these misconceptions are now slowly being eradicated. We are hoping that the Ateneo de Davao, and the rest of the academic community in Davao, will be able to find ways to make their curriculum sensitive to indigenous peoples – taking note of our history, our characteristics, our real conditions, and our aspirations.

We are happy to share our insights to you and make ourselves understood as peoples with a distinct way of life.

There are about 200 million indigenous peoples all over the world. In the Philippines, we number about 6 to 7 million or 10% of the population. In Mindanao, there are 2.5 million indigenous peoples called Lumads. The Lumads of

Mindanao are divided into 18 ethno-linguistic groups.

The indigenous peoples' vision for life is so simple. It is to live harmoniously with nature and mother earth.

The Lumad peoples' relationship to the land and the environment is inseparable and inviolable. Land is considered as the source of life and a gift from Magbabaya (God). Land is the sole hope for the sustainability of the lives of the Lumads. The rivers, the trees, the sky, the sun, and other creatures found in it sustain the lives of human beings.

Thus, the unabated destruction of the forests, the rivers, where the ancestral domains of the Lumads are found, is an ethnocidal act perpetrated against us.

From our current experiences, we know that ethnocide – or the systematic annihilation of indigenous peoples – is being undertaken by both local and foreign corporations authorized by the Philippine government and with the support of the military establishment.

To us Lumads, the destruction of ancestral domains means the death of our tribe and the succeeding generations. The struggle for land is therefore the only choice we have to make, even if this means sacrificing our lives. It is universal for all human beings, that when they are pushed to the wall, there is nothing left for them to do but to fight back. Our struggle is a struggle for land, for life, and for the future.

Our Present Conditions

Indigenous peoples could never expect the future to be bright since their ancestral domains have been allotted for

both local and foreign corporations especially for foreign and big domestic mining concessionaires with the passing of the Philippine Mining Act of 1995.

As provided for under the terms and conditions of the Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA), big mining firms are allowed to exploit our mineral resources for 50 years. This practically sacrifices our quest for full and immediate recognition of our ancestral domain.

The full control of the mining concessionaires, specially of the multinational and transnational corporations, through the innumerable rights and privileges given them by the government, further aggravates the situation and the future of indigenous peoples. Mining firms are given timber rights, water rights, the right to evict communities, and the right to use explosives, aside from mining rights. This is a result of the government's greed for more investments to come to the Philippines at the expense of ordinary folk like the Lumads, peasants and workers.

Examples of our ongoing war against mining companies are seen in the struggle of the Mansaka against Echo Bay Mines, an American and Canadian-owned firm, the B'laans against Australia's Western Mining, and of small scale miners against Southeast Mindanao Gold Corporation.

Large scale mining is the single biggest threat that indigenous peoples and the whole Filipino people face today. As of April 1997, a total of 120 foreign applications for mining concessions are being processed by government for approval. If all these applications, including smaller concessions, are approved, about 13 million hectares or 40% of the country's total land area will be covered by mining! In Southern Mindanao, these applications total about 800,000 hectares.

There are other programs implemented by the government through its line agencies like the DENR, DAR, OSCC and now the NCIP (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. These programs have only brought havoc to our lives.

These programs, aside from mining, include the Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA), Social Integrated Management Agreement (SIFMA), Community Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA), eco-tourism, dams, geothermal and other so-called "Development Programs and Projects" within the ancestral domains of indigenous peoples.

To say the least, these programs are a pestilence to our lives and to our territories.

Let us take the case for instance of the Ata Manobos of Talaingod. Black propaganda has been promoted by the military against the struggling Ata-Manobos. But the issue boils down to land conflict. Talaingod is a case where Lumads have become divided because of a so-called 'development project.' There have been deaths and evacuations, diseases have spread, a *pangayaw* (tribal war) has been waged – all because a tribe is willing to fight to death for its rightful claim to land.

In spite of a 1994 Memorandum of Agreement between Alsons and the Ata-Manobos, which requires Alsons to respect the boundary defined by the Ata-Manobos, incursions were *again made in the early months of 1997 and have worsened with the deployment of the military under the leadership of the 72nd Battalion Infantry of Col. Honesto Dayang. Because of the company's efforts to occupy more of*

the ancestral domain of the Ata-Manobos so that it could plant trees to serve foreign markets, the pressure of the military has further endangered the fragile situation in the said area.

As part of the Lumad peoples' tradition and culture to defend and protect its interests from outside intruders, they are determined to fight it out by all means.

'Development projects' under the concept of Philippines 2000 has posed a serious threat to us. We live in dangerous times. Our choice is between survival or death.

Added to these is one of the most dehumanizing projects ever undertaken in the history of humankind. This project is called the Human Genome Diversity Project or HGDP. The project aims to take DNA samples from 722 tribes all over the world. In Mindanao, the target (or probably already the victims) of HGDP are the Agusanon-Manobos and the Mamanwa. The HGDP wants to know why indigenous peoples are naturally resistant to diseases, why they have strong physical characteristics, etc.

To us, our bodies are sacred because they are made by Magbabaya. We therefore find this project a sacrilege and a desecration of Creation. It spits upon the face of God. Sadly, the government has kept silent over this issue, even after it was exposed last year by indigenous groups all over the world.

The acts and priorities of the government have benefited only the privileged few- giving them the full protection of the law- rather than us who bear the effects of the destruction of our own land, our ancestral domain.

Yes, the government has passed the Indigenous People's Rights Act or IPRA last year. But the IPRA is an

ineffective legislation to protect our rights. Our rights can be protected only when all legislations that legalize land grabbing are scrapped. Unless this is done, IPRA becomes a useless scrap of paper.

The Need for Solidarity Between Lumads and non-Lumads

With this pressing situation of the Lumad peoples today and that of the coming generations, we believe that we will not be the only ones who will be affected. Who will inherit the earth but both our children – Lumad children and non-Lumad children? Will we allow them to live in a world dominated by a development concept that emphasizes exploitation rather than empowerment? Profit rather than human dignity? The utility of things rather than the interconnectedness of Creation?

The total control of our national patrimony, particularly our land and natural resources, by foreign corporations and some local cohorts with the blessings of the national government has already brought chaos, hunger, disease and death not only among the Lumads but to the whole Filipino people. It is not only a control over ancestral domains, it is a control of our nation's economic, political and socio-cultural system.

It is therefore apparent that, as we Lumads fight for our right to self-determination, we cannot be successful unless, as a nation, we can be truly independent from foreign control and exploitation. Our fight is linked to the fight of the workers, peasants, urban poor, educators and students for a better life, for greater equality, and for a development process that is in accordance with our cultural differences.

We want peace. But peace can only be attained if the government first respects our rights and if it stops all forms of abuse perpetrated by its instrumentalities, especially the military.

Our Call

We call on all Filipinos to join hands together to fight the common enemy of oppression and exploitation. We particularly call on the academe to be on the side of our struggle. Your support to our struggle for land and life is very important. We understand that while we are decisive in bringing about change in our conditions, our struggle to defend the land needs the support of students, teachers and administrators. After all, we are of one and the same roots.

Our specific challenge to you is to make the educational system relevant and responsive to the issues and concerns of indigenous peoples and the environment.

Perhaps it is time to ask: Has your curriculum rightly imbibed the positive values of Lumads among children and the youth? Have you taught your children not only the importance of preserving the environment but also the people whose lives are intertwined with it?

Have the social sciences faithfully pointed out the rightful place of Lumads in our national history? Have your social researches truly reflected the conditions of indigenous peoples or are they merely academic, and hollow intellectual exercises?

When most Lumad children can not read, write or count, in what way can you make your school and yourselves share your knowledge and abilities?