

GRP-RPM-M Peace Process

GRP – RPM-M: The “Other” Peace Process

The three-decade old rebellion being waged by a Mindanao-based group of Filipino communists who call themselves the Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa sa Mindanao (RPM-M) or the Revolutionary Workers’ Party in Mindanao has brought about the loss of tens of thousands of lives, displacement and destruction of thousand of families, and untold sufferings of people and communities in Mindanao

THE LOCUS OF THE CONFLICT: MINDANAO

This conflict is better understood within the context of the continuing poverty and powerlessness in Mindanao, the second biggest of the country’s 7,107 islands. Despite the island’s richness and giftedness, Mindanao remains as the country’s poorest region. Its rural populace alone, despite their closeness to agricultural resources are among the poorest, mainly because 70% of those who work in agriculture do not own the land that they till. Mindanao remains marginalized economically, politically and culturally. Decisions concerning the lives of Mindanaoans continue to be made by decision-makers in Manila, the Philippines’ seat of economic, political and socio-cultural powers.

Mindanao has a history of unrest due partly to the diverse character of its population, encompassing indigenous peoples, the Moros – Muslim communities, and Christian settlers. This diversity has led to conflict between and among these groups. The indigenous peoples remain the least involved or consulted group of all.

14 of the country’s 20 poorest provinces are in Mindanao. All the Moro provinces belong to the 10 poorest.

THE RPM-M REBELLION

It is in this setting that the local communist rebellion continues to thrive. RPM-M used to be part of the Communist Party of the Philippines, but broke away and became known as the CMR (Central Mindanao Region) Rejectionist Group. After joining other rejectionist factions from Luzon and Visayas, they again broke away during peace negotiations with the Estrada government and eventually formed RPM-M. RPM-M continues to be a significant force as it pursues its organizing and expansion work regardless off the on-going peace process. While it has informally committed itself to a cessation of hostilities in view of the confidence-building measures agreed upon by both parties, it continues to gather momentum in its sectoral and territorial expansion and strengthening.

THE PEACE PROCESS

In late 2003, there was an unexpected breakthrough in the search for peace in Mindanao. While much attention is given to the two major peace processes: with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and with the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA), a third process quietly began.

Towards the later part of 2002, Iligan City Mayor Quijano received feelers from the clandestine RPM-M that they wanted to explore possibilities of entering into a Peace Process with the Philippine Government to finally put a just end to a three-decade old struggle. Both Mayor Quijano and Ike delos Reyes, the most senior leader of RPM-M, agreed to approach Kaloy Manlupig of Balay Mindanaw to seek his help. A series of serious informal meetings followed.

Through the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC), the creation of a panel to conduct formal peace negotiations with RPM-M was recommended to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Consequently, Presidential Memorandum Order No. 108 dated July 19, 2003, has created the Government of the Philippines (GRP) Panel for Negotiations with the RPM-M.

The GRP Peace Panel has been mandated to undertake negotiations with the RPM-M in accordance with the Government's policy framework for peace and the national agenda on poverty alleviation. Similarly, RPM-M has also formed its own counterpart panel. Both panels also formed their respective secretariats.

Balay Mindanaw was appointed jointly by GRP and RPM-M as the Independent Secretariat (IS) of this Peace Process. Balay Mindanaw organized the appropriate teams and approached various independent agencies for support. The German Development Service responded quickly and commissioned the services of Paul Clifford from UK as a peace adviser. When the Philippine government decided not to release any fund to the IS, the IS had fortunately already secured funding support from the German Development Service and other resource partners. Eventually, more partners joined this journey. Among them are Misereor, Cordaid, GTZ, KAF, TAF and others.

The process that is used for this peace negotiation does not involve complex political negotiations. Rather, a local peace and development agenda that will have an immediate impact on the ground will be pursued. As part of this peace process, a series of barangay and community-based consultations in areas where the RPM-M has presence will be conducted to determine community problems as well as to identify the projects that can be undertaken as a response to these problems. The projects are expected to be mainstreamed and incorporated in all the levels of local development planning.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF THE PEACE PROCESS

On September 22, 2003, the First Round of Formal Talks and the signing of a document entitled Joint Commitment to Pursue Peace and Development in Mindanao signaled the formal start of the peace process between RPM-M and the Government. Two other documents, namely Rules for the Conduct of the Peace

Talks and Rules for the Conduct of Local Consultations, were also signed. The last document is significant as it marks the first time that the participation of peoples and communities has been guaranteed and institutionalized as integral part of the peace process, thus, making this peace process different from all the other peace process in the country.

During this time the immediate implementation of the peace process was somewhat delayed through the national elections, and because the Government failed to grant clearance for consultations in communities declared by RPM-M. However, the two parties have resumed serious discussions about the future of the peace process. While both sides expressed some hesitations and disappointment, both have also reiterated their commitment to the pursuit of peace, and expressed optimism that the journey towards peace they have begun would eventually bear fruit.

SMALL VICTORIES OF THE PEACE PROCESS

Notwithstanding the fact that the process will be a continuing struggle for all the stakeholders involved, both the GRP and RPM-M continued to sign agreements they believe would support and strengthen the initial gains of the peace process. During the Second Round of Formal Talks last October 27-28, 2005, both Panels signed the fourth document entitled "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities". This was followed by the signing of another two documents during the Third Round of Formal Talks last December 19, 2006. The fifth and sixth documents are "Guidelines and Ground Rules on the Implementation and Monitoring of the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities" and, "Joint Resolution to Further Advance the Gains of the Peace Process", respectively.

Although both Panels have been in a transition period because of the changes in their composition, both, and even the respective secretariats, are open to continue building confidence to gain mutual trust in pursuing the humble beginnings and history of the process.

But apart from the formal talks and signed agreements, the process became even more meaningful to the communities who felt their involvement as stakeholders of peace through the community consultations conducted. It is in these communities where real situations of inequity, underdevelopment and unpeace are seen and felt and their involvement should not just be "peace dividends" but as a really significant part of the life and momentum of the process.

Eighty-nine (89) communities and tribes in 17 municipalities in 5 provinces in Mindanaw have been involved in these community consultations. Eighty-nine communities and tribes who were able to analyze their situations, appreciate their natural and human resources, identify their needs, and formulate their peace and development plans while continuing to live in peace and harmony with nature and their respective cultures. Eighty-nine communities and tribes who have empowered themselves and gained confidence and inspiration to take the first step to do something for themselves and not just wait.

Fifty (50) out of the eighty-nine communities and tribes are already implementing their peace and development plans by starting small livelihood projects. The project may be small, but for these communities who have been neglected by the government to provide for their basic human needs, the livelihood project is already a big leap towards their struggle to attain genuine equity, development and peace by and for themselves.

THE PEACE PROCESS MOVING FORWARD

The ultimate goals of this Peace Process are: 1. A final resolution to the conflict through a formal peace agreement between GRP and RPM-M; and, 2. Empowered, sustainable and peaceful barangays, communities and tribes able to freely analyze their situation, appreciate their resources, identify their needs, formulate and implement their own plans, and living in harmony with history, culture and nature. While it is important not to lose sight of the ultimate goals of the peace process, it is also equally important to ensure all the necessary mechanisms and strategies for reaching the goals are efficiently and effectively implemented.

Keep the Parties talking. Continue facilitating the dialogue. Sustain and even strengthen channels of communication, both formal and informal. Initiate regular face-to-face meetings between and among parties. Observe mutuality – what one gets, the other also gets. Encourage candid dialogues and discussions. Never allow long silences. This will help ensure that the arms remain silent. Help organize the next round of formal talks, and encourage the faithful implementation of the Formal Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities.

Keep the peoples and communities involved. This is non-negotiable. Organize and conduct more local consultations. Exert utmost effort to innovate and improve the consultation design to be better, more participatory, more efficient, more effective and more productive. Continue the local peace consultations in 15 remaining communities and tribes from the first batch of barangays, and target 100 more indicative barangays for consultations.

Show results: Small Victories that Inspire. The peoples and communities are hoping. In fact, they are expecting and waiting for concrete things to happen after the consultations. We have asked them to give their own share, show their own stake. It is a continuing challenge to help mobilize external resources to supplement and complement internal resources, and set-up a system to monitor compliance and delivery of commitments from various agencies and stakeholders.

Set-up mechanisms to support signed documents. Organize the Local Coordinating and Monitoring Teams (LCMTs) and the National Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (NCCH). The challenge of the LCMTs is not only to monitor violations of the cessation of hostilities agreement but also to monitor implementation of development projects in the local consultation areas.

Build on initial successes. Sustain the momentum, spread the good news. Exert efforts to let more people hear the good news. Let us now do something about monitoring and documentation, and about our media and communication plan.

Celebrate and anticipate the good news but be prepared for the worst. This Peace Process has survived and surmounted odds and obstacles – the lack of resources, the long lull caused by the electoral/political season, the differences in frameworks and approaches of the parties involved, the moments of doubt when one or both parties were seriously contemplating of ending the process, the moments of impatience, anger and despair, and many other tests of endurance, fortitude and commitment. But the parties involved have emerged stronger, wiser, more committed, more principled, more peaceful.

More importantly, the Peace Process has become a way of striving for those involved: the Panel members, the secretariats, the partners, and most especially the peoples and communities – a striving which has been peaceful and empowering...and rewarding.

Indeed, this Other Peace Process is proving this Other Paradigm right: Empowered and sustainable communities are the real foundation of lasting peace. The process itself, and not the process' end, will already allow these communities to win small victories, and build peace by themselves. The final resolution is important but communities need not wait for this. Building peace is here and now.

And as long as there are communities who believe in this process, our journey for peace continues...