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Moro Women's struggle for Human Rights in the Philippines

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A case of Violence against Women in Conflict Situation: Southern Philippines

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Asalamo Alaykom... May peace be upon you.

It is ironic that while the Philippines boasts of having the only woman president in Southeast Asia, it is criticized as one of the most corrupt government in Asia, recognized as having the highest record of political killings that even surpassed the former dictator.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is the main perpetrator of violence against women in the Philippines. As head of the state, she helped perpetuate the notion that women's rights are reserved only for wealthy elites like her --- the privileged educated class who has the only access to state agencies that will implement United Nations mechanisms and local laws that will propel protection of women's rights.

The government's policy to misappropriate public funds in favor of foreign debt, military upgrading and unnecessary government spending and corruption is creating a poor living condition, backwardness and ignorance for the 87 million Filipino people. The administration would rather siphon the national wealth to their pockets rather than enhance social services such as education and health which could help promote economic and social progress not only for women but to all the Filipino people.

This economic inequity deprives most of the women who are poor to enjoy their civil and political rights, let alone fight for their gender rights.

The plight of the Moro people in Mindanao

The Moro people are the Muslim minorities in the Philippines that comprises ten to fourteen percent of the 87 million Filipinos. In the 2000 survey of the National Statistics Office, the Moro people only comprise 3.7 million living within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Moro people also live in provinces outside of the ARMM and in key cities in the country.

Like the rest of the Philippine society, most of the Moro people live under poor living condition. Most of them farm the rice fields owned by rich families in Mindanao and fish in the seas, lakes and rivers in "competition" with the big trawlers owned by fishing companies. Some manage to find work in agricultural plantations and manufacturing corporations in Mindanao. Others make money out of vending smuggled products in key cities. A small number work as bureaucrats of the ARMM and other government agencies.

Six of the provinces in Mindanao are considered poor by the Philippine government. Three of those came from the ARMM. Despite of providing a huge supply of rice and

corn to the rest of the country, the people remain poor. Mindanao is rich in mineral resources, but these are explored and mined by multinational companies.

And for other areas that remained unexplored and unexploited, that would give more wealth to the government, are the areas in conflict. Residents become vulnerable to the presence of multinational companies insistent in owning the lands, seas and mountains therefore seek government's help and its machineries. In these areas, the government called for the All-out War and the implementation of the US "war on terror" under the pretext of running after terrorists. They arrest innocent civilians and entice people to point fingers at anybody whom they can tag as terrorists in exchange for a million peso reward.

The consequent declaration of US President George Bush of the "War against Terror" made matters doubly worse for the Moro people Mindanao became a second front for the war on terror of Bush. With Gloria Arroyo being the first ASEAN head to jump into the bandwagon of Bush's war on terror, Arroyo repeatedly and conveniently used "terrorism" as an issue against the Moro Islamic Liberation Forces (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF); armed Moro liberation groups in the country who have long been an oppressive policies and actions of government.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines churned out intelligence report one after another alleging that MILF and MNLF were coddlers of this and that gang and foreign terrorist like the Pentagon Kidnap-for-ransom gang, the Abu Sayaff bandit group, the Jama-ah Islamiya of Indonesia and even the Al Qaida.

Discrimination against the Moro people reached high pitch level with the Arroyo government demonizing the Moro people as bombers, kidnappers, drug traffickers, terrorists and so on. Their firm grip on their religion, culture and ancestral domain were portrayed as obstacles to the country's progress. Their *madaris* (Islamic schools) were suspected as training ground for terrorists, while the *Ustadzes* (Islamic preachers) were abducted and arrested on suspicion of leading terrorist organizations and aiding known international terrorists.

The peace policy of the government with rebel groups is overshadowed by its use of massive military strength as a means to end the conflict. In Central Mindanao, the Philippine government bombards communities influenced by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front using ground artillery and fighter planes. In Sulu, Filipino soldiers hunt side-by-side with US soldiers for Abu Sayyaf whom they categorized as Al-Qaeda cells but in the process their military operation have affected the areas dominated by the Moro National Liberation Fronts. The rest of Mindanao, the government implemented series of counter-insurgency programs against the Communist Party of the Philippines – National Democratic Front – New People's Army.

The three fronts have standing peace negotiations with the Philippine government, the MNLF having signed an agreement in 1996 and waiting for its full implementation. With the MILF, the government has completely abandoned the agenda on ancestral domain

thereby closing doors to its resumption. With the CPP-NDF-NPA, the government recognizes the US government's Foreign Terrorist Organization as the basis for not reopening talks with the group.

In the midst of this "war on terror", being brutally unleashed on the people of Mindanao, it is no longer surprising to find the Bangsamoro women suffering most. They have always borne part of the hardships and burdens and they together with the children have often suffered the most from the worst of wars and other unfortunate natural and man-made disasters.

The Moro women

The Moro women comprise half of the population of the 3.7 million Moro people. Their number could reach more than 6 million if Muslims in the other two islands of the country, Visayas and Luzon, are to be included. They live mostly in the rural communities in the southern part of the Philippines. The Muslim people of Mindanao come from 13 ethno-linguistic tribes. Majority of them are in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); in the five provinces of Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Lanao Sur, Basilan and Maguindanao. They are also a majority in 11 towns in other provinces (7 in Lanao del Sur; 2 in Zamboanga del Norte, 1 in North Cotabato, and 1 in Palawan).

Most of them farm side by side with their husbands, fathers and sons in the rice fields. Others tried to work in sardines factories in outside of the ARMM areas. A big number of Moro women work abroad as domestic helpers and professionals.

They are also scattered in several rural communities in the Davao and Cotabato Provinces, Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat and Zamboanga Peninsula, as well as in major cities of these provinces. These places have mixed presence of Muslims and Christians in the area. In Manila and other cities in the Luzon and Visayas, they live mostly in slums tagged as havens for anti-social activities such as drugs and illegal vending of smuggled goods.

Most of the Moro women live in poor and backward conditions. The lack of subsidy for education and other social services has made Moro women illiterate, uneducated with no access to employment hence less likely to stand on her own and is bound to stay forever with her family or most likely to get married in exchange of having a better living condition.

Some Moro women have no access to Islamic and Arabic education that is needed for her to understand how laws and decisions are implemented in Muslim families. While some have studied in the Islamic Madrasah and the government's madaris system, this does not give her capability to interpret the Holy Qur'an and the Hadiths, only to read it. It doesn't also help that during Jumaat, she is not allowed to go the mosque to hear the khutbahs and participate in the religious and political discussions.

The economic status and illiteracy of Moro women in the grassroots community have made their fathers and their husband's influence over their choices and decisions, or maybe even lose that right.

This is compounded with incessant military operations in Moro communities. Since families have to constantly move, they leave behind their properties and even source of livelihood. They have nothing to come back to after the military operations.

In the rural areas where there is a big presence of MNLF and MILF rebel forces, Bangsamoro women constantly bore the brunt of the Philippine government's all-out war and military aggression. They are the ones who are left behind to defend their homes when their fathers, husbands and sons go to the battlefield to fight. They are the ones forced to evacuate, bringing with them their children and their properties, dodging bullets and bombs along the way. When in evacuation centers, the Bangsamoro women and their children suffer malnutrition and all sorts of diseases.

Many documents of human rights organizations will show incidents of pregnant Moro mothers who got wounded in their belly and who have died because they were hit by bomb shrapnel, grandmothers who have died due to exhaustion, and women raped by government military forces. In the cities, wives had to travel from afar to fight for the release of their husbands who are linked without due process with the MILF and were used as fall guys for the bombings of malls, piers, bus terminals, movie theaters in cities in Mindanao and elsewhere in Metro Manila and other places in the country.

Women's lives are put at risk every time the government resorts to military might to resolve a conflict. They become victims of massacre, aerial bombardment, strafing and summary killings. They are ignorant of their civil and political rights, and even if they invoke them, there's no guarantee that military men will recognize and respect their rights.

One case was Sarah Lumandong of Tipo-Tipo Basilan was hit while elements of the Task Force Thunder were having a test mission of their artilleries in her area on August 9, 2007. Lumandong, a mother of a ten-year old baby, was hit in her left leg while harvesting her crops in Ungkaya Pukan.

Some Moro mothers and daughters would rather be silent about their rights rather than face the military's retaliatory actions. Others would accept settlements from the military in exchange for full payment of medical services.

One case was Buh Bizma's in Indanan, Sulu in September 2006. While conducting test fire mission using live bombs, one US soldier fired at a wrong direction hitting Buh Bizma's family lot. Shrapnels of the bomb hit Buh Bizma's back who was washing clothes at that time.

No cases were filed against the US troops, and it did not even reach deliberations at the US-RP Visiting Forces Agreement Commission. At the victim's level, the AFP

immediately offer settlements like paying for the medical needs of the victims in return they will sign an waiver that cases will not be filed against the US troops.

Individuals belonging to religious and progressive Moro organizations are also demonized by the combination of the anti-terror policy and anti-insurgency operation plan of the Arroyo administration. Identifying them as terrorists in public give license to military, police and paramilitary groups to kill or abduct them.

In Cotabato City, Moro activists also fall prey to the Oplan Bantay Laya implemented by the army in Maguindanao and North Cotabato. Moro activists are being labeled as terrorists and communists and the progressive organizations they belong to are labeled as fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Streamers bearing the name of Suara Bangsamoro were accused of being a front of the New People's Army while the names of the officers of Suara Bangsamoro were identified as terrorists in Cotabato.

A history of women in the Moro struggle

Historically, Moro women were part of the struggle of Moro people in defense of their land. From Bud Dajo to the other mountains of Mindanao, women took their bolos, kris and stones to defend the Moro Sultanate against intruding US soldiers during the American colonization period in the 1900s.

The tradition of taking up arms and fight side by side with the Moro men remain valid till today. The Moro revolutionary groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front continue to recruit Moro women as part of their military and political committees. MNLF has its Bangsamoro Women Army while the MILF has the Bangsamoro Women Auxiliary Brigade.

The wives of MNLF founding chair Prof. Nur Misuari, Desdemona and Rohayda Tan, were not only known as a revolutionary Moro women but Moro women leaders . There were known women military commanders in the MNLF that until today still are regarded women leaders in their communities.

At first it may seem that scores of fighting Moro women were mostly coming from the families of educated and landed elite. Perhaps exposure to western education has given them an edge over Moro women coming from the low-income and underprivileged sector. But there are a number of Moro women in the armed revolution coming from the grassroots, too.

Critics of the Moro liberation struggle say that there is no assurance that women will benefit at the end goal of the struggle. If the moving ideology of these liberation groups is Islam and the goal is the creation of an Islamic State or the implementation of Shariah in the communities, how would the Moro women ensure their political and gender rights.

The Communist Party of the Philippines, the National Democratic Front and its armed wing the New People's Army have been known to recruit Moro women in their fold as

part of their commitment to uphold the Moro people's struggle for right to self-determination, by liberating not only the Moro as a sector but the Moro women as well from the bonds of feudal and patriarchal control.

Groups that claim revolutionary alternative against the present government should provide these venues for women participation. There is a need for the Moro women to be informed to be able to articulate and participate in the debate of where the Moro struggle should lead.

Moro women's participation in the struggle for political rights in the Philippines

It is difficult to be a woman in a Muslim community, especially if you were brought up in a strict feudal and patriarchal family. But with a Muslim community consistently been under attack by both the military aggression and the discriminatory perception of the public, the role of a Muslim woman reverses. The *Inah/Babu* (Moro mother/aunt) or *Bai/Potre* (Moro daughter), who has always been relegated in the background and told not to speak her mind, reverses into a fiery woman fighting against injustice committed by the government and in defense of herself, her family, religion, and homeland.

In my nine years as spokesperson of a Moro (Filipino Muslim) organization, I have met several Moro women who have spoken up against the systematic military aggression in our communities and who protested against the presence of US forces in our homeland.

While not everyone in far flung areas in Mindanao recognize women at the forefront of the struggle, they cannot ignore the fact that there is nothing left for the Moro people by to let their women stand up and take the cudgel of the struggle in order to defend their communities.

There is also a dearth of Bangsamoro women representation in government from national down to the local government. If there are, most could not relate to the actual needs and aspirations of the poor and disadvantaged Moro women. There are some civic Moro women's groups and agencies but they hardly reach-out to Moro women victims and relatives of victims of human rights violations, especially wives and families of suspected rebels and those who profess sympathy to the cause and struggle of MNLF or MILF forces.

Suara Bangsamoro party list-organization being a Moro national organization that aims to pursue peace based on justice in Mindanao and the whole Philippines, support and pursue initiatives for peace talks intended to address the root causes of social and political conflict. It rejects total war and seeks redress to victims of human rights violations. Promote human rights and social justice and reject all types of foreign intervention.

In this light, SBM is also committed to upholding the political, economic and cultural rights of women and children, particularly of the rights of the Moro women, in the midst of war conflicts and aggression. SBM unites with other women, individuals and

organizations calling for equality and integrity for women. It expresses solidarity for all victims of injustice, discrimination and political persecution.

Determined and strong women leaders, activists and organizers in fact make up majority of the leaders and activists and organizers of SBM from the national level down to the local communities. Since the formation of SBM, Moro women have been instrumental in the formation of many of its chapters, in holding forums, conducting education seminars on human rights and other relevant issues, organizing fact-finding missions and relief operations, and in voicing out concerns and protests on issues involving not only women, but issues that affect the whole Muslim people of Mindanao and of the whole country.

Suara Bangsamoro took part in fact-finding missions to gather information and conduct dialogues with the residents regarding the presence of the US and Filipino soldiers in their communities. The missions were able to confirm reports of human rights violations by Filipino soldiers and found proof of involvement of US troops in actual combat operations. A wife of a farmer shot by an American soldier testified against the violation of US soldiers and even went to the halls of Congress to present her case against the Visiting Forces Agreement. This journey renewed protests against direct U.S. intervention in the Philippines since the pull out of US bases in the country.

The women in Suara Bangsamoro initiated forums, symposiums and protests against socio-economic problems of the country. In solidarity with other women victims, Suara Bangsamoro hold forums highlighting the International Day to End Violence against Women and Children and using the rape case of Nicole, a young Filipino woman in Subic, by a US military soldier as the main topic of the programs.

A series of forum with the theme “*Breaking Silence, Ending Violence*” Was initiated by Suara Bangsamoro together with the Gabriela Women’s group as a way to encourage and give venue for Moro women to speak out .

The Women in Suara Bangsamoro also attended the Women’s International Solidarity Affair in the Philippines in Quezon City, on Sunday August 5, 2007 as part of its solidarity with struggling women in other countries.

The role of the Muslim women specifically in times of conflict and war aggression, cannot therefore be undermined. Turning women from being just victims into an empowered people, able to decide for themselves and able to confront tremendous crisis after another; has been a long, continuous and arduous process and is indeed a formidable task.

Unfortunately despite their significant and remarkable participation in the struggle for peace based on justice in Mindanao and in the country, current organizations, including Suara Bangsamoro fall short if not amiss in addressing specific needs and interests of the Bangsamoro women. Membership of women’s groups is still small and education work has to be more sustained and systematized to reach a greater number of the Bangsamoro women. Furthermore, a larger majority of them, especially those victims in areas of

conflict remain unorganized and unaware of what is really happening, and of what the roots of the conflict are. Many remain as mere victims of displacements and other human rights violations vulnerable to manipulations and dirty machinations by those in power.

Taking into consideration the plight of the Moro women and their vital role in advancing the rights and interests of the Moro people, the Suara Bangsamoro passed a resolution to implement a sustained program of education and training for women. A program that would specifically focus on reaching out more Bangsamoro women victims of the war on terror, help them organize themselves and at the same time help strengthen and consolidate existing ones. This need was seen urgent especially in the light of renewed military offensives in Muslim communities. Special premium will be placed on education and training.

It is not just enough to protest and resist oppression and exploitation of women. It is not enough for women to get involved in the struggle for the rights of the whole Bangsamoro people or of the whole country. What is important is the empowering of women on all aspects of their lives; on the issues of governance, on the daily issues of economic and social life, on the issue of equality and women's welfare, on the issue of state terrorism, war and destruction of their communities.#