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THE BRIDGE BETWEEN HUNGER AND PEACE: A RELIEF FEEDING PROGRAMME

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Fr. Bert Layson,
OMI, parish priest of
Pikit, North Cotabato

The 30-year old conflict in Mindanao is at once political, economic and social. It has deep historical roots, particularly in the history of colonisation of the Philippines archipelago. The indigenous peoples (Lumads), and the Muslim communities (Moros, a term coined by the Spanish colonizers from the word “Moor” to refer to all Muslims, whether Arab, African or Asian) found their traditions and political structures destroyed and their ancestral domain overlooked. Over the past three decades, the Mindanao region, considered the Philippines’ food basket, has contributed one-third of the country’s GNP, yet merited less than 10 percent of its revenue allocations. Mindanao advocates refer to Manila as “imperialist” — for historical reasons and more recently, the post-war governments’ neglect and marginalisation of the island and its inhabitants.

Widespread poverty and restiveness, and demands for self-determination have led to continuous armed conflict in Mindanao, with the government variously or concurrently fighting communist rebels, separatist and



Mother and child refugees

Islamic armed groups, principally the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), as well as the kidnap-for-ransom Abu Sayyaf, and pirates and bandits groups operating in the region. While the government was able to strike a peace agreement in 1996 with the MNLF, full implementation of the agreement and the promotion of peace and development have remained a challenge.

Indeed, it may appear that violence is endemic in Mindanao. This is what some Mindanao watchers — academics and politicians alike — are quick to say, their verdict suggesting a situation beyond repair. But not so, says Fr. Roberto “Bert” Layson of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), parish priest of Pikit municipality in Cotabato. Fr. Bert’s family had resettled in Mindanao in the seventies, forced by extreme poverty in Visayas. “Our family simply had nowhere else to go,” he said. At the time, the Marcos government found the offer of homesteading in Mindanao to the disenfranchised a convenient if easy solution to the worsening poverty across the entire country and the spread of the Muslims’ demand for self-determination.

Fr. Bert “grew up” with the war in Mindanao, where his best friend was a Muslim. He recalls a childhood when Christians, Muslims and the Lumads lived together.

Caught in the Crossfire

Only a week after Fr. Bert was assigned as Pikit’s parish priest in June 1997, war resumed for the *nth* time between government troops and the MILF in nearby Camp Rajahmuda, triggering the exodus of more than 30,000 of Pikit’s civilians, mostly women and children.

The renewed hostilities three years later, when then president Joseph Estrada declared all-out war against



Muslims and Christians worked side by side in the preparation and distribution of the children’s food.

Whether it was rice broth with vegetables or mung bean soup, the feeding project assured the children of their minimum daily nutrition requirements.



the MILF, affected 500 barangays and displaced 800,000 civilians. Mortars and bombs began pounding again. In Pikit alone, 41,000 civilians — Muslims (70 percent), Christians (20 percent) and Lumads (10 percent) — had to take refuge in the town’s plaza, which was squarely between the government’s military encampment and the hills that hid the MILF combatants. Others sought refuge in vacant lots, giving rise to “tent cities.”

The town of Pikit, the province of Cotabato, indeed most of central Mindanao, had been cut off. Without access to their farms nor to emergency assistance, the civilians are the silent, helpless victims of a senseless war, says Fr. Bert. “War doesn’t distinguish between Christian, Muslim and indigenous.”

In the schools and other makeshift evacuation centres including the “tent cities,” six families had to share a four-by-four-meter space. Taking cognizance that these refugee shelters had also become fertile breeding ground of malnutrition and disease, the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives responded to an appeal for help from the Archdiocese of Cotabato with a PhP790,000 (Cdn\$19,750) supplemental feeding project for children aged 2-6. “Children are the most vulnerable victims of war,” says Lourdes Marina “Lady” Padilla, then coordinator of Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. “Apart from the trauma, they have to cope with the physical demands of running from bombs, walking distances to safety, and a lack of food and sleep,” she added.

According to Fr. Bert, some of the children had become incoherent, while many had dark circles under their eyes from lack of sleep. The children could not sleep well in fear that deep into the night, the guns would sound again, and they would be separated from their parents in the chaos of flight.

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As if fleeing from war was not traumatic enough for these nerve-wracked children, they were also witness to the government’s positioning of the cannons by noon to powder the enemy to bits. “You have to remember, the targets of these cannons were husband, father, brother or friend to some of the women and children,” Fr. Bert stresses.

Between October and December 2000, five feeding centres were established by the archdiocese’s disaster response team led by Fr. Bert. Everyday within the three-month period, a total of 10,000 children were assured one meal that guaranteed their basic nutritional requirements. The menu was prepared by the barangay nutrition scholars of the local government. This varied, from *lugaw* (rice broth) to mixed *ginataan* (coconut-based soup of starch and banana) to *monggo* soup (mung bean soup).

The daily feeding programme, while benefiting the children, also involved the men and women in the shelters. At least 800 Christian, Muslim and indigenous women and men worked side by side, shredding the vegetables that were to go into the menu, or delivered the food to the nearby barangays. The parents, adds Lody, helped monitor the children’s health and weight gain.

“In a sense, the feeding programme diffused the tensions as well, besides nourishing the children,” recalls Fr. Bert.

Spaces for Peace

The feeding project in Pikit was significant in that it harnessed the entire community’s cooperation — of the Muslim, Christian and indigenous population, as well as the local government. It also served as the vehicle for subsequent healing and trauma-recovery efforts supported by other international and local development agencies. Thirty-five Muslim and Christian volunteers were trained in stress debriefing, and then fielded to the barangays to conduct psychosocial activities, including play therapy, among the traumatized children.

“Some of these children have internalized the culture of aggression. There was a boy who was begging his grandmother to evacuate when the fighting began. After three days, he was no longer bothered, and he would in fact cheer at the sound of gunfire,” says Fr. Bert. “We have to reverse that or there is no hope for these children.”

The trauma healing was complimented by a series of “culture of peace” seminars (COPs) attended by the



Many times, the feeding project was the only source of food for the day.

The internal refugees share
a light moment during a
Culture of Peace seminar.



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adults. Here, the villagers would tell, in their own words, of their wounds and losses, visible and invisible, from the war. “The oral narrative is important,” says Fr. Bert. “When the people tell their stories, they see they are no different from one another; that they are no less or no more affected by the war than the one seating beside them.” The realization almost always ends up with the participants, including the men, crying upon each other’s shoulder. “The COP sessions also make them realize that no one of them wants war, everybody wants peace.”

The COPs include a history of Mindanao that tells of a time when Christians, Muslims and indigenous families lived in harmony. In this portion, surviving elders are asked to share their memories.

Even as war continued to rage, the parish priest led negotiations with the military and the MILF to give the people a chance to rebuild and resume their lives. Socio-economic and infrastructure projects in shelter, livelihood, water and sanitation were undertaken in barangay Nalapaan. “When we accompanied 96 families composed of Muslim and Christian evacuees back to their village, I saw two women — one Muslim and one Christian — crying profusely while embracing each other, as if sisters that had not seen each other in years,” recalls Fr. Bert.

In November 2001, Barangay Nalapaan was declared a “Space for Peace.” No one will brook war, or even war rhetoric, in this village. Christians and Muslims — the majority of them graduates of the parish’s peace education — are jointly implementing the different projects that have been initiated, so no one is in fear of being “excluded” from the benefits of these. The men are lending farming implements to one another.

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The war gave way to “tent cities,” where families slept on the bare floor and their few belongings were strewn about.



Another “Space for Peace” consisting of five other barangays of Pikit was declared in June 2002. Meanwhile, the convent in Pikit is no longer visited just by the Christian parishioners. During the Ramadan of 2002, the Christians parishioners celebrated the breaking of the fast with their Muslim friends. “We prepared halal food for them,” says Fr. Bert. The Muslims, for their part, give some of their produce as offering for the Sunday mass.

“If people can be trained for war, they can be trained for peace,” says Fr. Bert. “Peace-building is like building blocks. It cannot be built from the top. You have to start from the bottom, from the grassroots.”

In February 2003, another armed confrontation forced the people in at least 11 barangays of Pikit to flee their homes anew. (*See story on Liguasan Youth Association for Sustainable Development on pages 51 to 55.*) “It’s a mess here. Babies, children, mothers, old people, there are thousands of them. My heart begins to cry again,” Fr. Bert said when the war resumed.

He decried the rehabilitation war had undone. At least 94 percent of Pikit’s population, a therapy project had discovered, were traumatized by the armed conflicts in the area — five in all since 1997. Pikit children showed signs of prolonged crying, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, an inability to socialise with other children, suspiciousness of strangers, extreme fear of any sight of men in uniform, and loss of interest in school. With the therapy project, Pikit was just beginning to heal.

“But I am not yet prepared to give up,” Fr. Bert said. He and a number of community members, along with civil society groups, continue to work and advocate for lasting peace in Mindanao. A fresh batch graduates from the COP seminars as this story is being written.

“I am not yet prepared to give up peace work.”