

The Moro Times

FRIDAY
November 24, 2006



■ Dr. Carmen Abubakar of the Philippines confers with Dr. Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia-based International Movement for a Just World and Dr. Imtiaz Yusuf, Chair of the Plenary 1 session of the AMAN 3rd Assembly and International Interfaith Peace Forum: Reform and Resistance in the Quest for Peace held in the Universitas Islam Negeri in Jakarta, Indonesia on November 15 to 18. Looking behind them is M. Abdus Sabur, AMAN Secretary General.

Basilan gets diplomatic boost

ZAMBOANGA CITY: Despite their countries' travel advisories, the ambassadors of six countries with strong anti-terror campaign programs visited the city of Zamboanga and the Muslim dominated province of Basilan, bastion of the local terror group Abu Sayyaf.

Canadian ambassador to the Philippines Peter Sutherland, said the visit is a demonstration of their collective effort to bring substantial development aid to Mindanao. "We want to see this part of the country develop and we hope to deliver more assistance because Mindanao is extremely important for us," he told the Adnkronos International (AKI).

Disclosing that Britain is considering Mindanao for greater humanitarian assistance, British ambassador to the Philippines Peter Bevington said, "We visited Basilan because we want to see what we can do for this beautiful and now progressing island."

Both the Canadian and the British ambassadors were involved in handing over computer equipment to some of Basilan's poorest areas. US envoy Kristy Kenney also handed 10 new computers with internet connections for the Muslim students of the Islamic Institute of the Philippines (IIP) in a Muslim village of Rio Hondo, in Zamboanga City.

"We are happy to be part in your learning process and we hope that this new computers will be of help in your studies," Kenney told the students during the ceremony.

Samira Gutoc

Rating Gov. Ampatuan's State of Region Address: Passed or Failed?

BY PAT TULAWIE

REGIONAL GOVERNOR DATU ZALDY AMPATUAN, in his second Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao State of the Region Address, took pride in what his administration has achieved in the first year of his term. Stating his region's economy is sound and healthy, Ampatuan glorified the GMA rice and corn program and GMA livestock and fisheries programs.

He went on to reveal that ARMM is the top seaweeds producer, netting 503,002 metric tons in 2005. Investments in ARMM for the first semester of 2006 were at P288 million which is 12% more than last year's total investments. If the number of registered names is the sole measure for business growth, then business grew by 30% from 301 to 470.

Ampatuan stated that in the

first semester of 2006, jobs generated in the industry sector registered 3,394, an increase of 3% when compared to the first semester of 2005 which was 3,282. Jobs generated in the agricultural sector were higher than that of the industry sector at 21,959. Dole-ARMM initiated a job fair which had a turn out of 1253 job vacancies in both local and overseas employment.

Despite the governor's appar-

ent confidence in the economic state of his region, his administration's efforts barely made a dent on the rising unemployment in the ARMM area which increased from 2.5% in July 2005 to 4.5% in July 2006 as reported by the National Statistics Office. Further, average inflation rate in the region rose from 9.1 in 2005 to 9.7 in 2006.

Ampatuan also reported that 629 infrastructure projects valuing P1.3 billion were implemented out of the 2005 & 2006 government allocation. In addition, the president has extended financial assistance for infrastructure in the amount of P500 million. He further mentioned infrastructure projects that ARMM will benefit through the ARMM Social Fund under World Bank and JBIC Funding. Forty four

projects amounting to P184.6 million funded by the United States are being implemented. USAID has also several projects in various parts of ARMM. A total of 190 barangays in ARMM are the beneficiaries of Alliance for Mindanao Off-Grid Renewable Energy (AMORE) Projects also funded by USAID and other international agencies. Another AMORE 2 Project worth US\$12 million has been launched in the region.

The relevance of infrastructure in the peace process of a region devastated by war and disconnected geographically cannot be overstated. But the government's commitment to its development decreased from 30% of total ARMM appropriation in 1998 to a meager 9.7% in 2006. The additional P500 mil-

lion development fund the government has infused has barely made its mark. A portion of which was even used for a different purpose. A sizeable amount and a number of the development projects that the governor extolled in his SORA and a lot more he did not mention are foreign-assisted.

The constituents of ARMM barely feel the effects of the catch-up program of the government. It is nowhere drawing near to the envisioned development that the peace process should have brought. Plagued by the increased peace and order problems, the lack of fiscal support from the national government and the chronic mismanagement by leaders of ARMM, the people wait for the promised dividends.



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On the need to frame the charter change discourse in Moro term

ONE of the underemphasized objectives of a written constitution, which is by nature a document approved by the majority, is the protection of the rights of political minorities. In the language of Constitutional Law, a constitution acts as an "auto-limitation" of what States can validly do. For example, to lawfully deprive a person of his property, it must be done in accordance with "due process"—a term infused with elements of fairness and reasonability. By putting constitutional limits on the power of government, which power is, in turn, obtained in democratic societies from the majority, the rights of political minorities who do not possess or have access to such power, remain protected. Otherwise, the political majority would have carte blanche to oppress minorities who do not possess countervailing political power. Consequently, for the Bangsa-Moro, the community of Filipino Muslims that comprise a mere 5% of the population in the Philippines and suffer the effects of social, cultural, political, and economic marginalization and discrimination, the constitution is a vital document. For the BangsaMoro, it is in this context that the current social debate about charter change must be analyzed.

In the Philippines, contemporary charter change debate is centered on political leadership (Presidential or Parliamentary) and, essentially, on who will govern, for how long, and under what structure (Bicameral or Unicameral). While these issues are important and deserve to be discussed as part of the charter change discourse, these, unfortunately, are not the main concerns of the BangsaMoro. The subject matters that primarily affect and interest Filipino Muslims center on their historical marginalization—ancestral rights, reparations, federalism, and self-governance. Thus, while concerns on the structure and form of government are intrinsically important because they will have serious and long term impact on governance, these structural concerns, save for the federalism debate, are not high on the Moro agenda.

To put it more directly—the structure of government, which may be altered because of a revision of the Fundamental Law, is not so much of a concern for the BangsaMoro as is the issues of ancestral rights, reparations, federalism, and self-governance. Moreover, the economic and social marginalization of Muslims in the Philippines makes it difficult for them to engage in a public discourse on charter change that will emphasize BangsaMoro concerns. The importance of minorities having a "voice" in a country's political process cannot be over-emphasized. Minorities concerned with obtaining political concessions must engage the majority and work to obtain their support for the minority agenda. A process of revising the constitution that effectively excludes the BangsaMoro is problematic at best and

The Jihadist Adel A. Tamano

The subject matters that primarily affect and interest Filipino Muslims center on their historical marginalization—ancestral rights, reparations, federalism, and self-governance.

creates conditions for further marginalization.

Ironically, charter change proponents from the current administration claim overwhelming support from the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). While, generally, Moros support a revision of the Constitution in order to achieve a greater degree of self-governance, i.e. support for federalism, Filipino Muslims view the current charter change initiative with great suspicion and skepticism, particularly given the lack of genuine attempts from the National Government to obtain inputs and recommendations from the BangsaMoro.

Part of the skepticism on charter change is premised on the belief of some Moros that, historically, the Christian majority have used the law and legal processes to dispossess and marginalize Moros. For example, many Filipino Muslims, particularly of the older generation, believe that the Torrens System for land ownership and registration had been used and abused in order to "steal" Moro ancestral land. More recently, the condition contained in the Tripoli Agreement that the Agreement itself had to undergo a constitutional process of ratification is often considered as a grand deception by the National Government and proof of the State's lack of bona fides.

Conclusion

According to Justice Holmes, a constitution is "an experiment." Unfortunately, for the BangsaMoro who, under the 1987 Constitution, still suffer the lowest levels of per capita income and literacy within the ARMM and continue to face social and economic discrimination, the experiment appears to be failing. So given this fact, does the current push to amend the charter bode well for the BangsaMoro and what should be their response? Considering that the central issue of the current initiative is political leadership, survival, and structure, the answer seems to be in the negative. Additionally, the unseemly haste for revision of the fundamental law by charter change proponents without giving political minorities, such as the Moros, sufficient time to analyze the issues and come up with a reasoned and united stand, is a cause for grave concern. Obviously, if Moros are marginalized in the national discourse on the issue of constitutional revision, then the output, which is the revised constitutional document, will not be reflective of the concerns of the BangsaMoro. Consequently, unless there are mechanisms in the process of charter change that will insure inclusion of Moro concerns, such as ancestral lands, federalism, and self-governance, then the BangsaMoro will be wise to withhold its support for revision of the fundamental law.

(The author obtained his Master's Degree in Law from Harvard Law School (2005) and his Master's Degree in Public Administration from the University of the Philippines (2003). Atty. Tamano is a lecturer at the College of Law of the Ateneo De Manila University and the Institute of Law of the Far Eastern University. He is the author of the "Handbook on Impachment under the 1987 Constitution.")



Pride and Prejudice in Media (ongoing)

Reflections on the Philippine policy of exclusion and inclusion

BY JOLLY S. LAIS

THE term Moro reflects the identity of 13 ethno-linguistic tribes in Mindanao who are basically Muslims. Long before the coming of Spaniards in the 16th century, sovereign Moro political structures dynamically governing Mindanao, Sulu, Palawan which were already in place and expanding control over the Visayas and Luzon Islands as early as the 14th century. The Sultanates being the popular form of government then also started enjoying flourishing trade with Asian neighbors like China and other southeast Asian countries.

The coming of foreign invaders, particularly Spain, and its subsequent attempts to conquer Moroland disrupted the progress of the Moro nation. Centuries of wars between the colonizers and the Sultanates took place and the Moros stood firm fighting the invaders with fierce resistance. The Moros withstood Spanish occupation and remained unconquered people unlike most inhabitants in Luzon and the Visayas who were Christianized and became Filipinos, a name given by the Spaniards to Philippine inhabitants. By the way, the Philippines was named in honor of King Philip of Spain. Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan were never part of the Philippines during Spanish period and the Moros remained sovereign people, preserving their identity, homeland, culture and religion as a distinct people ever since.

When Spain sold the Philippines through the Treaty of Paris to United States in 1899, Moroland was treacherously included by the Spaniards in the twenty million dollar buy-out. Another war broke out, the Moros yet again engaged another colonizer, the US colonial occupation forces.

US imposed and forcibly instituted a blue print policy of subjugation along with appeasement tactics to win over some Moro Datus less critical of American interests. From being a colony, the Philippines later became a neo-colony through subsequent US-controlled Philippine governments from Commonwealth regime of Manuel L. Quezon to the present domination.

The once dominant Moros in Mindanao became a minority, structurally marginalized and discriminated through policies of assimilation and minoritization which instituted reforms and laws declaring Moroland as public land open to northern settlers among others. As a result, a steady influx of settlers from the Visayas and Luzon occupied these lands along with business interests of the Americans and its local Filipino elite acquiring vast tracts of lands in Mindanao.

The US effectively side-stepped from direct confrontation with the Moro resistance. Designed to be used as a frontliner, the US-backed and controlled Philippine Government successfully institutional-

ized its exclusion and inclusion policies towards the Moros by way of systematic manipulation and control primarily through legislations. The latter is a number game in the Philippine Congress whose members are largely anti-Moro, landed, with big business interests in Moroland.

The Moros are historical and contemporary victims of these phenomena. Moros are now in a worst state than ever before. And still, the Philippine continue to exercise a military solution while supporting weak and corrupt Moro leaders in the government-created Autonomous Region In Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), that pursues a politics which divides the Moros and instill impoverishment, poverty and injustices.

ARMM has the highest illiteracy rate in the entire country today. Its five provinces are among the top 20 poorest provinces in the Philippines. The ARMM topped the poverty threshold and ranks among the highest in infant and maternal mortality rate. While the rest of the regions enjoy an average of 90% pre-natal care, only 49.9% of ARMM would-be mothers have it. Hence, no genuine development, no genuine self-determination and no genuine political recognition. Thus, the scarcity of resources in the vast Moro areas is designed to aggravate its already impoverished condition which makes the Moros more rebellious. These are just few manifestations of government's discriminatory policies.

Even before the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) final peace agreement could be fully implemented, the Philippine Congress which is controlled by non-Moro and anti-Moro legislators, willfully enacted Republic Act 9074 subsequently violating the provisions of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement (PA). This resulted in the failure of the GRP-MNLF PA implementation.

Even after long years of negotiation, the GRP panel now began asserting to the MILF panel that the agreement should be within the realm of the Philippine constitution. The Philippine state is forcing the other party to talk and agree under GRP's laws which the MILF does not recognize. Or perhaps the GRP is just treating

the peace process as a mere counter insurgency tool or simply, the GRP panel do not have the authority or mandate to agree with MILF on the issue of territory. This is another story of accommodating "peace talks" only for "talks" purposes. After all, "peace" means no business for military operations, no huge budget, no big business profit interests, no multi-billion peso worth of logistics, no military career opportunities, no deals.

The government might lose its standard of having an "every decade" peace accord with the Moro revolutionary groups. It must be remembered that the first was the Tripoli Agreement signed in Tripoli, Libya in December 1976 between GRP and MNLF under Marcos dictatorship. The Jeddah Accord followed in 1986 after ten years during Aquino regime. Then on September 2, 1996, after another ten years, GRP-MNLF accord was signed under the Ramos presidency. Perhaps the Arroyo government can still catch up maybe just for the sake of consistency this 2006.

The concept of social exclusion and inclusion is highly compelling because it speaks the language of oppression and it enables the marginalized and the victimized to give voice and expression to the way in which the people experience globalization. The roots of exclusion are deep, historical and can be perpetually reproduced in a classic or modern day dimension. These structural processes of exclusion and inclusion have endangered those "excluded" in their struggle for legitimacy and "place claiming". This is the dawn of the new type of politics. The struggle of the ethno-racial Moro people for self-determination which includes the struggle for political power and resources in their own homeland takes a non-class dimension of emancipation but a struggle for survival as a people. And herein come the legitimacy of struggle under international laws that will force to go beyond the realm of formal equality. The absence of genuine political will and recognition of the Philippine government of the Moro people's genuine aspiration is an implied reality of oppression and domination.

The genuine rights for self-determination is not a question of demand of the Moro people, rather, it is a question of ending the oppression, domination and exploitation perpetrated by the Philippine government whose affairs is controlled by politico-religious and landed elites controlling the big business empires all over the archipelago. I do not have enough time to tell you how the Philippines can live without Mindanao.

Interestingly, the world should know that the Moroland was illegally included in the

Philippine territory. Historical accounts are available upon request. Consequently, the attitude of the Philippine government for non-development and continued oppression against the Moros only justifies Moro political option.

The struggle for genuine self-determination should continue. This aspiration should be achieved, where the affairs of the Moro society will be charted in accordance with world standard of equality such as STANDARD LIVING—that is free from clutches of poverty and hunger, decent job and quality living for all; a WAR-FREE HOMELAND—that means the pull out of all military formations from civilian areas, a cut in the military budget and re-channeling the budget reduction to basic social services especially poverty eradication programs; PROGRESSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE NATION—means responsible extraction and utilization of natural resources such as minings, oil, natural gas and others; and a SOVEREIGN MORO NATION—which means free from foreign control and dictates, free from bondage of foreign debts, free from trade liberalization, and safe from wreck brought by globalization.

In the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) perspective, the Moro question should be in the regional agenda. After all, the Moros shared historical and cultural ties with the most south east Asian countries. In the past, some of the members of the ASEAN are actively involve in the peace negotiation between GRP and MNLF/MILF. But their involvement is within the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The BangsaMoro quest for genuine self-determination in an ASEAN regional concern like any other struggles of minority peoples such as the Aceh in Indonesia, the Karen question in Burma, Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand and other minority peoples in the region.

The ASEAN should come up with a regional mechanism to include in its charter the politics which will uphold the democratic and basic human rights, and institutionalization of social justice for the minority peoples is the ASEAN member states. The ASEAN should take part in the ongoing GRP-MILF peace negotiation and negotiations of similar nature involving member states in the region taking into consideration the basic rights of all peoples under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other International and Humanitarian Laws.

(Delivered in the ASEAN Civil Society Conference-Philippine Process, The Philippines in the ASEAN: Facing the challenge of Regional Integration, October 13-14, 2006, SEAMEO-INNOTECH, Diliman, Quezon City)

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In Afghanistan, you don't fly a kite

BY NASSER SHARIEF

This article is taken from an interview with Mariam Rawi of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan). In its website www.rawa.org, RAWA describes itself as "the oldest political, social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in fundamentalism-blighted Afghanistan since 1977." Rawi is one of the many women participants from all over the world who took part in the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) Assembly 2006 and International Interfaith Peace Forum held on November 15 to 18 at the Universitas Islam Negeri in Jakarta, Indonesia. Moro Times had the good fortune to catch her for an interview at the conclusion of the workshops before she took off for another destination. To guarantee her security, the name given is fictitious, but not her story.

JAKARTA: The windswept range of Afghan mountains and its stiff cliffs are ideal for flying a kite, but children there dare don't risk the ire of the conservatives who hold sway in the countryside and the capital of Kabul. Afghanistan's extreme religionists have their own notion of what is allowable and what is not. Decades of conflict have not changed the situation. Foreign occupations come and go. But the strangling hold of the powered elites on the population—be they of the Taliban or of the Northern Alliance—has not changed.

Moro Times: Has the U.S. intervention changed things dramatically in your country?

Mariam Rawi: Other things, maybe. But no, it hadn't changed anything on the condition of our people. We are still seeing the

worst of it. The Americans are only interceding in so far as it affects their interests. What the local authorities do with their people is not their business.

Moro Times: Give us an example.

Mariam Rawi: Like for instance, they don't lift a finger on the opium trade. When they inspect vehicles, American personnel are under tacit orders to gloss over any opium cargo. The smugglers are the politicians themselves, and whenever a cache of opium is intercepted, a call from a minister frees it instantly.

Moro Times: How important is opium trade?

Mariam Rawi: Opium is what glues up the regime and the warlords in Afghanistan; otherwise, they fall like a house of cards. Opium gives them power, money to buy arms, and financial muscle to control everything in society. It makes them gods. About 90 percent of the income of the warlords is derived from opium. They have huge money deposits abroad. That's why they are unshakable.

Moro Times: Who are these "fundamentalists"?

Mariam Rawi: These fundamentalists largely come from Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. They have a twisted interpretation of Islam, and where

women are concerned, they are very cruel.

Moro Times: How is the economic condition of the rest of the population?

Mariam Rawi: The gap between the rich and the poor is huge. The rich earns as much as \$3000 a month but the poor could only scrape \$50. Most villages have no electricity. Amidst the destitution, you can see birthday parties booked in the most expensive restaurants and hotels. The contrast is so glaring.

Moro Times: Isn't opium use supposed to be against Islam?

Mariam Rawi: This is the funny thing. Fundamentalists are so concerned with the minutiae of women's attire, how they should behave, caning them in public, humiliating them, nipping in the bud any move to improve their life, education, and health, and using religion as a pretext, twisting Islam out of context, but the same people turn a blind eye on the opium. What is so funny is that the children of those in power in the Northern Alliance are sent for

schooling in the West. Many families of ministers and high ranking officials in the government have been living abroad for the last 20 to 25 years.

Moro Times: How was life before in Afghanistan, many years back?

Mariam Rawi: You mean, many, many years back?

Moro Times: Yes.

Mariam Rawi: 35 years ago, my grandmother and my mother never used a *burkha* to hide their face. We had electricity, we had kindergarten and we had good government-run schools. And women go to work!

Moro Times: I can see that you have a pretty face!

Mariam Rawi: (Laughs) Too bad for your Moro Times readers. You can't print a photo of me!

Moro Times: How is the media influencing events in Afghanistan?

Mariam Rawi: This is the very reason that I hastened to take part in the AMAN assembly. Our complaint is that there are very few news on Afghani-

stan. Western media and CNN have no access to what is happening inside. We have to bring out what's happening. When we are on the news, our organization, RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan), gets steady streams of emails, and when we drop off radar, we are completely forgotten.

Moro Times: How does your organization survive?

Mariam Rawi: Through the Afghan Women Mission. In Tokyo, young people use the internet to raise funds for RAWA. We have female students in the U.S. especially in Los Angeles. We pool donations from across the globe. What we get, we arrange school classes in villages for boys and girls; we put up orphanages, shelter, health care. We have limited financial resources, but we do the utmost we can.

Moro Times: How can people in the free world find out more about your organization and send their donations.

Mariam Rawi: Easy. Just google RAWA.

[MUSLIMS ACROSS THE NATION]

THE Magbassa Kita Foundation, Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, The Muslim Women Peace Advocates with the Support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung are organizing a conference in Zamboanga on Nov. 27-28. The conference is part of the attempt of MWPA to train, organiza and network women's organization in Muslim Mindanao with technical expertise provided by the Commission on Human Rights. The conference includes workshops designed to train women in conflict areas on, among others, human rights advocacy, monitoring and reporting. Former Senator Santanina Rasul and KAF's Klaus Preschle will open the conference, while Wilhelm Soriano will be the keynote speaker. Resource persons for the workshops are: CHR Region 9 director Jose Manuel Mamaug; Ustadz Esmael Ebrahim; Atty. Alaminia Laisa; Ms. Fatima Kanakan; Jurma Tikmasan, and; Mercia Alli.

Rey Trillana

PEACETECH 5, a regional talk show on peace-building to link Mindanao and Luzon in live-dialogue about the armed conflict was launched on November 20 simultaneously at Mere Marie MICHEAU HALL, gymnasium, St. Paul University, Quezon City and the Session Hall of the University of Southeastern Philippines in Obrera Campus, Davao City. Special guests included Gary Valenciano, Margie Moran and the Canadian Ambassador to the Philippines. This series of project is organized by St. Assisi Foundation and supported by UNICEF, CIDA, among others.

Samira Gutoc

AWARDED-WINNING film maker Gutierrez Mangansakan III is shooting a documentary on the late MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat to be shown in the World Film Festival 2007.

Samira Gutoc

THE House committee on national cultural minorities unanimously approved House Bill 5837, titled the "Anti-Religious and Racial Profiling Act of 2006," for second reading. The measure, principally authored by Lanao del Sur Representative Faysah Dumarpa, prohibits acts of religious or racial profiling against Filipino minorities such as "unnecessary, unjustified, illegal or degrading searches." Co-authors of the measure include Reps. Mujiv Hataman of party-list Anak Mindanao, Solomon Chungalao of Ifugao, Luis Bersamin of Abra, Laurence Wacnang of Kalinga and Mauricio Domogan of Baguio City, all members of cultural minority groups. Penalties include imprisonment for up to two years and fines ranging from P200 to P6000. Discrimination in job openings will also be criminalized, as well as refusing entry to restaurants, hotels and other establishments, if only because of the person's "traditional but peculiar attire."

Samira Gutoc

THE Center for Muslim Moderates (CMM) staged the Second International Conference of Muslim Leaders on November 22-24 at the Dusit Hotel Nikko in Makati City. The conference had the theme: "Assessment of Islamic Daw'ah and Moderation in the ASEAN Region." Senator Omar Tayib of Thailand spoke on the "Status of Islamic Da'wah in Thailand." Saaduddin Alauya, former Juifconsul, tackled "Shariah in the Philippines, Status and Prospects in Nation-Building," and Bai Omerah Lucman, former Social Welfare Undersecretary, dis-

cussed "The Role of the Philippine Muslim Women Council in Nation-Building."

Samira Gutoc

DAVAO-BASED Kaagan tribal leaders met Rep. Mujiv Hataman in Davao City last Nov. 10 to raise human rights concerns such as creating a Kaagan Human Rights Center and a data-bank of tribal concerns.

Samira Gutoc

THE Mindanao Commission on Women (MCW) organized a 3-day seminar on Mediation at Brookshire, Davao City. The seminar aims to equip women leaders in coping with conflicts in their communities by training them on alternative dispute mechanisms.

Samira Gutoc

MORE than 80 representatives of local government units (LGUs), people's organizations and non-governmental organizations attended the Southern Mindanao Conference on Peace and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) organized by the ASSALAM Bangsamoro People's Association last Nov. 18 in Davao City. SOCSARGEN Conference Workshop on Peace and MDGs was also held on Nov. 12 at General Santos City. ASSALAM in coordination with Maguindanao Center for Community Development also organized the Central Mindanao Conference Workshop on Peace and Poverty Eradication held on Nov. 6 in Cotabato City.

Samira Gutoc

30 Muslim women leaders from Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and Cotabato City underwent a "Training on Violence Against Women" organized by Moroweave and Women's Legal Bureau (WLB) at Royal Mandaya Hotel, Davao City on Nov. 11-14. The training is funded by The Asia Foundation and USAID aimed to orient community trainers to conduct VAW orientations in ARMM on January 2007.

Samira Gutoc

THE Girl Scouts of Marawi City are organizing a house-to-house awareness on solid waste management aimed to protect Lake Lanao. The lake, the deepest and the second largest body of freshwater in the Philippines, supplies much of the energy requirements of northern Mindanao. It has been the subject of controversial issues on environment lately.

Samira Gutoc

THE National Statistics Office-ARMM launched the Family Survey Report of 2005 at the Marawi Resort Hotel last Nov. 3. Concerns raised were the need to strengthen the civil registration system including monitoring of the number of deaths, births and marriages of Muslim-Filipinos which until lately was poorly maintained.

Samira Gutoc

EXECUTIVE SECRETARY EDUARDO ERMITA was conferred a Doctorate of Humanities at the Mindanao State University graduation ceremonies held Nov. 16 at the MSU Gymnasium in Marawi City.

Samira Gutoc

EXEMPLARY practices of LGUs in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in service delivery such as Upi and Indanan were showcased in the Mindanao Governance Forum held on Oct. 25-26 at Apo View, Davao City. More than 200 representatives from LGUs, civil society organizations (CSOs) and private sectors attended the event organized by the Local Gov-

ernment Support Program in ARMM (LGSPA), which aimed to engage CSOs, LGUs and private sector in commemorating 15 years of the Local Government Code (LGC) and challenge LGUs to apply their corporate powers in promoting economic development and generating local revenue.

Samira Gutoc

LGSPA is focusing on Maguindanao as a pilot of efforts of official development assistance (ODA) donors to converge more effectively. LGSPA is also assisting the ARMM's Regional Planning and Development Office (RPDO) to coordinate and analyze priorities in support of human security. ARMM's Department of Trade and Industry and LGUs underwent a coach training program last Nov. 20-24 in Cotabato City to support efforts to develop the local economy of the ARMM community, focusing on key industries and areas such as the halal and the Regional Economic Zone Authority (REZA).

Samira Gutoc

19 female Sharia lawyers from across Mindanao organized the Women Sharia Lawyers Association of the Philippines (WSLAP) during the Seminar-Training for Potential Women Judges held in Lispher Inn Davao City on Nov 6-13, 2006. The seminar composed of lectures on gender equality and gender sensitivity, comparative law on Code of Muslim Personal Laws (P.D. 1083) and Civil law. Part two of this training is tentatively scheduled on the first two weeks of April 2007. This training is aimed to equip the women sharia lawyers to become sharia judges in Sharia Courts. MSU Gen Santos City. Prof. Isnira Baginda was elected president. There are currently only two lady judges of Shariah courts in the country. The association envisions Islamic reforms through the empowerment, active participation of women sharia lawyers in the Sharia Legal System. The Pilipina Legal Resource Center (PLRC), Inc based in Davao City sponsored the training with the help of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

Samira Gutoc

THE 6th National Youth Parliament was held in Tagbilaran City. More than 150 delegates from across the country passed position papers on the following issues: Youth Migration; Magna Carta of Students; Adolescent Reproductive Health; SK Reform; Constitutional Reform; Youth Networking; and Information Communication Technology (ICT). Zarah Kathleen Aliih of Tawi-Tawi was elected president.

Samira Gutoc

Ho Chi Minh City meeting



Amina Rasul, Lead Convenor of PCID; Kem Reat Viseth, Advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Sok An of the Kingdom of Cambodia; Atty. Leo Dominguez, Chairman of the Philippine Australian Business Council; and John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia discuss regional issues at the dinner hosted by ASIALINKS sponsored by the Australian National University and the Myer Foundation at the Park Hyatt in Ho Chi Minh City.

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Safiyyah and Balik-Islam in Singapore

BY MAYA ABDULLAH

SINGAPORE is one of the preferred destinations of OFWs and a major source of remittances. With

The Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore, also known as Darul Arqam Singapore, is an organization that caters to the needs of converts to Islam. Darul Arqam is Arabic for 'house of Arqam.' Arqam was an early convert to Islam during the first three years of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood to Makkah.

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Maria Pilar "Safiyyah" Flores, 38, one of the Assistant Vice Presidents of the Darul Arqam, was born and raised a Catholic in Zamboanga City. She became a Muslim in 1992.

"I learned about Islam through a friend," Flores said. "I accompanied her as she attended lectures at the Office of Muslim Affairs."

Flores left for Brunei in 1997, where she worked for two years. The company she worked for in Brunei closed down after two years, and she accepted invitations from her friends to work in Singapore. While working in Singapore as a draftsman in an engineering firm, Flores felt the need to continue educating herself about Islam and asked around for an institution that catered to her interests. Her landlord referred her



■ Amina Rasul, Lead Convenor of the PCID, Ridzuan Wu, Safiyyah and Major Taharuddin Ampatuan are seen in jolly mood with the Singaporean Balik-Islam society during an iftar with the local Filipino community.

to Darul Arqam.

"Darul Arqam helped me through education," Flores said. "And for those who are a bit unfortunate, some monetary assistance is given."

Flores is one of the estimated 600 Balik-Islam Filipinos in Singapore, a large number of whom participate in the association's activities. The Balik-Islam have organized a community group which they call the Mabuhay Club.

The members of the Mabuhay Club invited Philippine Ambassador to Singapore Belen Anota last April to meet the Filipino Muslim Community in Singapore. The

group has now started to attend monthly meetings at the Philippine Embassy where most Filipino associations attend and report their activities and achievements.

"I'm the secretary of the group. Most of the time, we volunteer during festive activities, and some are pre-conversion advisers for would-be converts. So far, we are the more active members of the Darul Arqam."

Formed in 1973 as the Kumpulan Saudara Baru or The New Brothers Group, the association started with the objective of "having a place where new Muslim converts could get together

and develop religious and social relationships among themselves." The name Darul Arqam was given by the Mufti of Singapore, Syed Isa Semait in 1980.

Darul Arqam is a highly respected organization. Financially independent, it does not rely on government support. It is one of the organizations authorized to collect zakat (charitable donations). It provides the required support needed by new Muslims by conducting regular programmes including counseling sessions, the befriending programme as peer support network, evaluation of converts' development, and per-

sonal coaching. It also provides services to members and the community at large.

Asked if she would rather stay in Singapore to continue practicing her being a Muslim, Flores said she'd gladly return, only if the situation in the Philippines would improve.

"I may return," Flores said. "I saw that most of the people in our country, even those in the Muslim community, don't know what Islam is. And if ever I come back, I will try to help others understand more about our religion, both the non-Muslims and the Muslims, too."

Indon envoy: "Mindanao peace can be nursed back"

DESPITE an impasse in the GRP-MILF peace talks, 1996 GRP-MNLF peace talks facilitator and former Indonesian Ambassador Sastrohandoyo Wiryo who has served the United Nations as Permanent Representative, is optimistic about peace in Mindanao.

"Peace is a long and tortuous road...but it is the only way," he said in his lecture, "A Third Party Perspective of the 1996 Peace Agreement" which he delivered last November 2, 2006 at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel on a forum on the tenth year commemoration of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

"The basis of our hope is the knowledge that some measure of peace is already with us—a peace that is not guaranteed to endure and therefore still has to be carefully nurtured, a peace that is marred by violence every now and then but remains alive and can be nursed back to health so long as we love it and are willing to work and make sacrifices for it."

Wiryo, now a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta, recalled that the FPA negotiations were also stalled a number of times because of serious differences between the two sides. But negotiators persevered and "plodded on" until breakthroughs were made.

He credited the "statesmanship of President Fidel V. Ramos and the leadership and sagacity of Professor Nur Misuari" in forging the Peace Agreement. For this achievement, Ramos and Misuari even received the UNESCO Felix Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize "for the agreement they have made in ending the conflict on 2nd September 1996". **Rey Trillana**

Offsprings of rebels trained and hired in plumbing and carpentry

MAASIM, SARANGANI: Habitat for Humanity will be hiring Moro construction workers after 40 sons of former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants finish their 45-day training in building houses which is aimed to provide the out-of-

school youths the skills that can help them find jobs in the future.

The training is sponsored by AlterPlan, a non-profit, non-stock organization that works in partnership with community-based organizations and other non-profit organizations in

building their capacities to analyze, implement, plan and steer area-based development.

The participants will undergo training on the courses in masonry, plumbing, carpentry and welding in Barangay Lumatil, in this town. Their practical exam

will be to build one house near the training site.

The participants were recommended by the Peace and Development Advocates League (PDAL) in Sarangani headed by Commander Johnny Akbar to join the training. The PDAL is a

group of peace advocates operating in this province whose members are MNLF members who have been serving the identified Peace and Development Communities (PDCs) as volunteers engaged in community organizing. **Gandhi C. Kinjiyo**

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