

# 5,000 Filipino pilgrims leave for Mecca

BY HARIJA RIZA U. KHAMAL

**C**OMPUTERIZATION, cheaper air fares, accessible assistance, comfort. Performing one of the pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage (Hajj) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, has become easier for more than five thousand Filipinos, an all-time high because of low dollar rates.

Gone are the days when pilgrims have to travel months by ship to reach Mecca. Today, pilgrims after a day's flight, are even housed in air-conditioned tents after they perform the hajj rituals.

The weeks-long Hajj is required for every able-bodied Muslim male or female who can afford to do so at least once in his lifetime. Muslims, clothed in white, from all over the world converge in Mecca in a show of unity, submission and obedience to God and commemorate Prophet Abraham's (Ibrahim) sacrifice for what he loved most in the world - his son Ismael - at God's command.

In the Philippines, a pilgrim pays US\$2109 dollars as mutawwif (payment) for transport and accommodation in Saudi Arabia and 998 pesos registration fee with the Office on Muslim Affairs (OMA), which manages the Hajj operations in coordination with the Saudi authorities.

## Hajj then and now

A native of Basilan, Hadji Sauda Gappal related how convenient it is these days to perform Hajj compared to the time when a pilgrim has to travel by ship.

She first traveled to Saudi Arabia for Hajj when there was no available airplane yet. [Due to old age, she doesn't remember the date of her travel.]

Hadji Sauda recounted that at that time, she only paid P1,600 and had an allowance of P60 for the travel.

"We didn't pass through Manila. Our papers were prepared in Basilan. We board on a ship with our baon. I had with me two cans

of rice, one can of gas, two cases of softdrinks with my stove and kaldero," she said in native Yakan.

She said, it took them 29 days of traveling before reaching Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. While she said, these days, it only takes 19 hours of travel with comfort to reach the Hajj destination.

"When we cook rice, we tie our kaldero because when the ship swayed, our things also moved to the other side," adds Hadji Sauda.

After the pilgrimage, tears of joy mark the accomplishment of a pillar of Islam, the Hajj, as many of the pilgrims vow to lead a new life. The other pillars are shahada or testifying that there is no God but Allah and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger; salah, praying five times a day; zakah, giving charity and alms, and sawm, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

## Reforms in Hajj operations

In the face of criticisms against commissions collected during Hajj, newly-appointed OMA Executive Director Ali Sangki said OMA has implemented reforms to improve the process of Hajj operations. In the past, pilgrims have complained of exorbitant costs and lack of assistance while in Saudi Arabia.

Sangki said he implemented transparency in the operations by providing a step-by-step manual on WHAT TO DO during Hajj.

Five months prior to the start of the filing of application for the pilgrimage this year, Sangki provided prospective pilgrims with orientations on what activities they



■ The e-visa section of the Office on Muslim Affairs works round the clock, busy processing hajj applications due to the high turnout of pilgrims going to Mecca this season. PHOTO BY NASSER SHARIEF

will undergo during Hajj. "This outline will guide us and will let us know where we are at such time," said Sangki in an interview.

OMA's new chief also assured pilgrims that they will get the service that they had paid for. This is to avoid the reoccurrence of last year's experience, wherein some pilgrims were forced to board an airplane with cheaper class than what they paid for.

"I've already called the attention of the airlines through a letter sent to them. I have asked for a refund for our brothers," said Sangki.

Sheiks, who lead a group (jamaa) of pilgrims, have been accredited to ensure that they are capable of performing their duties to lead their jamaa properly. "The participating sheiks this year should be capable of reading and speaking Arabic," added Sangki.

"Also an assessment of these sheiks performance will be done by the people whom they lead. The assessment is important so that the Sheiks will be considered to participate again in the Hajj the succeeding year. The failure of the Sheiks to follow the standard that the OMA has implemented in handling the jamaah will result to their restriction from joining the Hajj operations." This year, travel agencies also had

to follow accreditation procedures. The OMA chief also noted that the supervisory team will also be assessed. The agency is sending a 40-person medical team to assist the pilgrims.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo appointed a Hajj Attache, Solaiman Mutia of OMA, to be stationed in the Philippine Consulate in Jeddah to help oversee the welfare of the pilgrims.

## PCID condemns attack on congress, calls for resolve and caution

THE Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) expresses its shock and condemnation over the deaths and injuries resulting from the explosion at the House of Representatives. The attack which initially appears to be a deliberate brutal act is a direct attack on one of the country's democratic institutions and should be denounced by all peace-loving citizens.

No political end or belief system can justify such dastardly act. We call on law enforcement

authorities to exhaust all legal means to put the perpetrators to justice. We commiserate with the families of those who have been victimized by this brutal attack. We particularly mourn the death of a brother in faith, Basilan Representative Wahab Akbar who passed away as a result of the blast.

Occurring on the heels of the Glorietta blast and in the context of current political turmoil, the explosion will definitely add to the political

instability the country is currently experiencing. More importantly, we call upon the media, politicians and other concerned parties to exercise caution in assigning blame to a particular group for the attack before a thorough investigation has been conducted. Let us not repeat the mistake of hurriedly blaming, arresting and incarcerating Muslims for all acts of terrorism (as many did after the Glorietta blast). Wrongly labeling or accusing a group as terrorists is as much a cowardly act as the attack on Congress itself.

We appeal to everyone to exercise sobriety and resolve. If the intent of this act is to sow fear, let us not be afraid. If the motive is to derail our resolve to fight corruption and injustice, let us be steadfast in our convictions.



■ From Left: Peter Schier (former KAS country representative in Malaysia), Mohamad Al-Mustaqem (Malaysia), Franz Tuginin (Indonesia), Amina Rasul (Philippines), Dr. Poetering, President of the European Parliament, Imtiyaz Yusuf (Thailand), Maarof Salleh (Singapore), Dennis Schrey (KAS). (Photo: European Parliament)

## ASEANs visit Euro Parliament

DELEGATES from ASEAN and Afghanistan were granted a rare opportunity to meet with Dr. Hans-Gert Pottering, President of the European Parliament, during their visit to Brussels from Nov 21 to 23. Dr. Pottering, a strong advocate of inter faith dialogues, paid very close attention to the delegates

assessments of the situation in their respective countries and in the Islamic world in general. Organized by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, The group met officials of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the German Bundestag, European Parliament, European Commission and Europe Aid.

## muslims across the nation

Anak Mindanao Representative Mujiv Hataman filed House Bill 3012 or an AN ACT PROHIBITING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PERSONS ON ACCOUNT OF ETHNIC ORIGIN AND/OR RELIGIOUS BELIEF last November 5. The bill seeks to criminalize Discrimination in Employment, Education, Delivery of Goods and Services and Accommodation.

The Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP) organized a job fair, YUPPEACE, for Muslim interns in Marawi City last November 22. Interns are to be employed in Manila-based companies to train these upcoming Muslim professionals to be equipped to manage their own offices when they return in the ARMM.

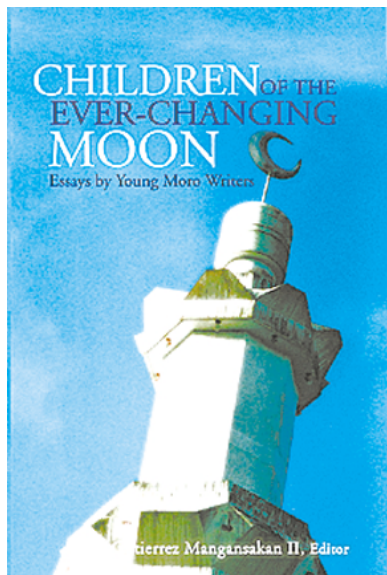
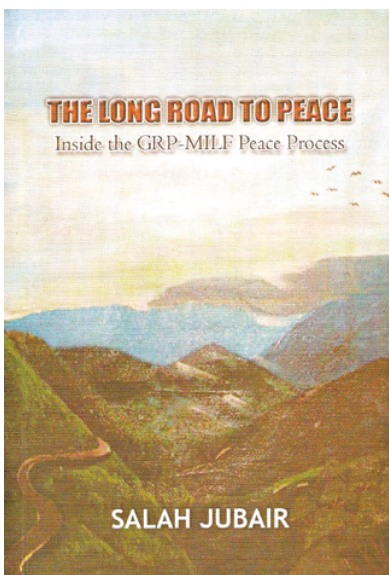
The National Commission on the Role of Filipino women (NCRFW) organized a Conference on Gender Issues in the Context of Islam in Davao City to come up with a statement that recognizes priority gender issues in Philippine Muslim communities and how these issues can be responded to at various levels. The issues discussed included 1) marriage and family, to include issues on polygamy, divorce, early/forced/arranged marriages, violence against women and other family and reproductive health concerns; 2) Muslim women's economic and property rights, to include economic empowerment, employment, property and inheritance rights, other economic rights; and 3) Muslim women's rights and governance, to include women's political participation / empowerment and leadership, peace and other legal and political issues and how government/religious authorities/Shariah/NGOs can push Muslim women's rights.

The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Scholarship Program sponsored an Educational Development Seminar on the theme: Developing Personal, Social and Leadership Know-how held in Cotabato City, Philippines last month. The IDB sponsors more than 100 indigent college scholars from Muslim areas every year in the fields of medicine and related courses.

The World Bank (WB) provided a 50,000 dollar grant to the Liguasan Youth Association for Sustainable Development Inc. for a project called Liguasan Environmental Preservation. Liguasan Marsh was the site of an all-out war in 2000.

The USAID-backed Philippine Environmental Governance Project 2 through the ECOGov has provided a grant to the NGO, Philippine Muslim Women Council (PMWC) for the Lake Lanao and Development Project to promote environmental awareness. Lake Lanao is endangered.

►NationD2



## Two Book Gifts on Mindanao

BY SAMIRA GUTOC

SHOPPING for a gift this Christmas? Two English-language books about Muslims, definite collectors items, were launched in Mindanao this week to coincide with the Mindanao Week of Peace on November 29 - December 5.

Another book tackling the peace process entitled, "The Long Road to Peace: Inside the GRP-MILF Peace Process," was launched by the Cotabato City-based Institute of Bangsamoro Studies in Darapanan, Sharieff Kabunsuan on November 28. Written by Salah Jubair, a nom de guerre of one of the leaders of the MILE, the 250-page book documents the events, processes and sentiments about the government and MILF peace negotiations

which has been going on since 1997. Mindanews Editor Carolyn Arguillas reports that, during the launch, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reached out to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and is "willing to accommodate" the unimplemented provisions of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement into their own (future agreement), MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal here said, after the launching of his book, "The Long Road to Peace: Inside the GRP-MILF Peace Process." The Foreword was written by former Secretary and Chairman of the GRP peace panel, Silvestre Afable Jr. Former Congressman Datu Michael Mastura, currently member of the MILF peace panel, wrote the Afterword. According to Prof Abhoud Syed Lingga, head

of the Institute which published the book, this is the second book of Jubair on the Mindanao Problem. His first book was "Bangsamoro: A Nation Under Endless Tyranny." Another book was launched, this time featuring the voices of young Moros. National Bookstore launched "Children of the Ever-Changing Moon", an anthology edited by Gutierrez Mangansakan III who is busily finishing a film on MILF Founder Hashim Salam. The anthology contains essays by 12 young Muslim professionals. It is the first of its kind to mainstream thoughts and experiences of Muslims. Launched in Shoemart (SM), Davao City on November 30, "Children of the Ever-Changing Moon" is published by multi-awarded ANVIL.



# Preserve life, protect one another!

**S**ERVANTS of Allah, fear Allah as He should be feared. Indeed Taqwa (to fear Allah) is Allah's advice to the first and last man on earth.

He said in the Holy Qur'an: "O you who believe! Fear Allah (by doing all that He has ordered and by abstaining from all that He has forbidden) as He should be feared. [Obey Him, be thankful to Him, and remember Him always], and die not except in a state of Islām (as Muslims) with complete submission to Allah." (3:102)

Dear brothers and sisters in faith, Islam is a religion of equality; no one is above the other on the basis of color, race and wealth. The only basis where one is better than the other, is piety or taqwa. If you are indeed a Muslim, you must always treat your brothers and sisters equally under the principle of qisas and above all, you must follow what Allah said in the Holy Qur'an.

Allah said in the Qur'an: "In the law of equality there is (saving of) life to you. O ye men of understanding; That ye may restrain yourselves." (2:179)

Believers in Allah, Islam emphasizes worth in valuing one another.

Allah says in the Holy Qur'an: "On that account: We ordained for the children of Israel that if any one slew a person, unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew the whole humankind: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the entire humanity. Then although there came to them our Messengers with clear signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land." (5:32)

Man is obliged to preserve and protect human life and be protector of one another. Allah forbids murder and spreading of mischief in the land. Islam prefers that the people should restrain themselves from bad deeds, such as murder, mischief, kidnapping sowing of fear or terror; rumor-mongering and stirring conflicts in society.

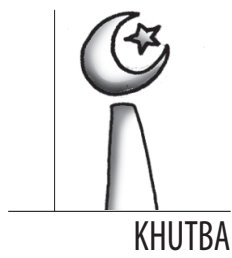
Whoever causes the development and economic security of the society, it would be as if he saved the lives of the entire humankind. This refers to upholding justice, equality, cooperation: like the rich aiding the poor.

Grievous punishments are forewarned of those who are doing mischief.

Allah said: The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: That is their disgrace in this World, and a grievous punishment is theirs in the Hereafter." (5:33)

Moreover murderers, robbers, adulterers and the like are the people who dare to wage war against Allah and His Messenger. They are the people, who, while still alive, are forewarned of execution, or crucifixion, or of cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile to isolated places; and that, if they did not change, hell-fire is their permanent abode on resurrection after death.

The preservation and protection



## The preservation and protection of human life is the wisdom of qisas.

of human life is the wisdom of qisas. In qisas, the life of each individual is sanctified and inviolable. If one kills another person, he must pay by giving his life as a sentence for his wrong doing, except when the close kin of the victim, pardoned him.

Allah stated in the Holy Qur'an: "We ordained therein for them: Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal. But if any one remits the retaliation by way of diat (blood money), it is an act of atonement for himself. And if any fail to judge by what Allah hath Revealed, they are wrong-doers." (5:45)

We can deduce from the above verses that there is in qisas the realm for preservation and protection of human life by the stern warning of life-for-life, an-eye for-an-eye... These may greatly deter man from committing crimes for fear of harsh consequences on them. This is only possible in an environment in which the Shari'ah is in place as the law of the land.

Allah ordained us to establish the law of equality (Qisas)—the concept of free-for-the-free, the slave-for-the-slave, and the-woman-for-the-woman. A law which none may question the principle upon which equality is founded.

Respected brothers and sisters in Islam, blood money is obligatory upon everyone who kills a person, whether directly or by any other means. If he intended the murder, the blood money must come from his wealth. If the murder was similar to intentional murder or accidental murder, the blood money is due from his relatives, as this is what the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) decreed.

Allah (SWT) in the Qur'an provides: "O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free; the slave for the slave; the woman for the woman. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude. This is a consideration and a Mercy from your Lord. After this, whoever exceeds the limits shall be dealt with in grave chastisement." (2:178)

In conclusion, in qisas there is indeed preservation and protection of human life. Qisas is a deterrent to commission of evil acts.



Gudo\*  
November 30, 2007

## A never ending story

### Why fertilize the Sulu Sea ?

BY FILEMON G. ROMERO



JIHADIST

**S**ULU Archipelago Reef Complex is one of the most ecologically important marine biodiversity system in the world, constituting about 25% of the total reef system of the Philippine islands. It supports the local seaweed industry, is the 3rd export earner of the Philippines and from which hundreds of thousands of seaweed farmers depend for their primary livelihood.

It may be affected by ecological disturbances that are induced by developments in the environment. To combat global warming, the international community is coming up with mitigation programs such as carbon sequestration by plants, through the process of photosynthesis, thereby reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Since the oceans constitute about three fourth of the planet surface, ocean fertilization technology, which involves large-scale addition of nutrients like nitrogen (urea), iron (haematite) is considered an option. This artificial fertilization will enhance the bloom of phytoplankton.

Since phytoplankton in the oceans are considered to be responsible for fifty percent of the carbon fixation in the planet, one such recent plan is to do sea fertilization experiments by dumping tons of urea into the sea to enhance their bloom. The more phytoplankton are produced, the more carbon dioxide will be trapped and this will help combat global warming.

However, considering the complex dynamics of ocean behavior and the possible chemical reactions that may arise from this artificially induced fertilization of the sea and its long term effects on the food web and the various ecosystems, this formula to solve global warming is still

being debated among scientists worldwide. Central to this debate is on its merits vis a vis the potential environmental risks that this experiment would bring about. As of now, there is no sufficient scientific evidence to prove that ocean fertilization would solve global warming. Therefore this makes the process highly speculative and far worse, the long term environmental side effects is not known.

However it is known that increased production of nitrous oxide and methane can result to uncontrolled production of phytoplankton and could cause harmful algal blooms or "red tide", like what the Philippines has experienced in recent years due to organic marine pollution. Moreover, organic overload in the already polluted coastal waters from domestic wastes can potentially have adverse impacts on the productivity of the seaweed farms because of overdose of nutrients. This can also possibly lead to frequent occurrence of "ice-ice" disease within the Sulu Sea area and therefore would severely affect the livelihood of coastal communities.

It is claimed that if more plankton is produced there will be more fish and therefore less people would go hungry. While this may be true, it is also true that after an algal bloom, when the algae in large quantities die and decompose they

will use up the dissolved oxygen in the water column and create oxygen depleted or dead zones in the oceans that can lead to massive fish kills. The recent case of the Bolinao fish kills might happen with this risky experimentation and this would definitely affect our thousands of small fishermen.

Organic pollution could eventually find itself into the Tawi-Tawi side of the Celebes Sea where outstanding biodiversity exists. The potential new species that were discovered in the recently concluded Inner Space Speciation project conducted by foreign scientists with their Filipino counterparts may be threatened.

The Ocean Nourishment Corporation (ONC), the company which wants to do this experimentation is from Australia, a country that has one of the highest carbon dioxide emissions per capita and has not even signed the Kyoto Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol is an agreement among nations to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. This company has applied for clearance from the Philippine Government to apply this technology for the purpose of earning carbon credits under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) for carbon-sequestration activity. They will potentially earn US\$25 million Virgin Earth prize to remove CO2 from the atmosphere. Bfar denies giving the clearance to this company to start this experiment while DENR claims to have no knowledge about the project. However, last October, the Australian Broadcasting Corp. (ABC) quoted ONC managing director, John Ridley that "they just completed the ex-

periment involving 1 ton of nitrogen in the Sulu Sea off the Philippines". And they are planning to upscale the experiment to 1000 tons of nitrogen over the next year upon approval from the Philippine Government. Who has given them authority to start in the first place? This is a clear violation of our environmental laws.

The question that many ask: Why should they do this experiment in the Sulu Sea and not in their Great Barrier Reef? My conjecture is that they are looking for areas to dump their tons and tons of urea which they have over produced and could no longer use since their country has shifted to organic fertilizers in agricultural production. So the Philippines as a Third World Country can be a plausible dumping ground and the Sulu Sea as their experimental station.

Environmental groups like GREENPEACE and WWF are asking government authorities to carefully assess this application for clearance to do the upscaling experiments, to conduct broad consultations and comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments on this technology, and to duly sanction the proponents of the recent dumping of urea into the Sulu Sea without any permit, without any consultation and without EIA.

A group of concerned Tawi-Tawians all over the world are leading petitions against this experiment.

(Romero is Professor of Oceanography and Environmental Science at the MSU-Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and oceanography in Sanga-Sanga, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. For further information, contact the author at filemongr@yahoo.com.)

## Living my dream

BY ATTY. MAISARA C. DANDAMUN-LATIPH

**A**T THE Elephant Café in Edinburgh, United Kingdom where JK Rowling's Harry Potter was born, I was calmly sipping my Mocha Java. Not only that: I was sharing that moment with my hubby and my daughter. After our 3-day stay with a Scottish family in Inverness, I found time to visit that historical place.

I was then a foreigner and a student thousands miles away from home. My childhood dream has been fulfilled by being granted with a Chevening Scholar at the University of Manchester, hosts to 21 Nobel laureates. As a Muslim, it has always been my dream that one day, poor Muslim children will be able to have access to quality education and that they may have opportunities like this to study abroad. There were difficulties in my learning a new discipline but my strong faith in Allah (S.W.T.) had helped me achieve this challenging dream.

Masters in Education is too far from my lawyer profession but belatedly I discovered that it is education that is nearest to my heart. I realized three years ago when I co-founded Iqra Kiddie Learning in Quiapo of more than 200 pupils mostly from marginalized sector. Apart from Iqra, my daughter and

husband gave me the inspiration to prod on and to pursue my masters. I believe in the power of education to our lift people out of poverty and ignorance. Thus, my quest for a higher learning.

As a student, the learning experience had been enriching and challenging owing to world-class tutors who stimulate our intellect and creativity. Indeed I learned important lessons in the creation of effective schools and the reasons why schools fail in achieving quality education. This field in education is very interesting and timely in my work in Iqra and improving the educational quality of public schools in the Philippines.

As a mother to my five year old daughter, I have also enjoyed being here because of the availability of quality education in primary schools. The UK boasts of one of the world's most advance quality control in education, i.e regular and consistent policy of inspecting schools and seeing to it that they are effective in the delivery of a good education for all regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background. I have seen important milestones in my daughter's education in all aspects-academic and social development and to think also that almost half of her classmates are Muslims. Likewise, my husband

who is also a lawyer had completed a 3-months Chevening Fellowships at the University of Birmingham for Islam and Governance. He gained valuable education as well as networking with the lecturers as well as the other fellows who are leaders from 63 countries.

Prior to arriving in the UK, I was then anxious in living in Manchester as a Muslims with my headscarf on. My worries disappeared as soon as step on Manchester soil. I saw more than a dozens of Muslims wearing hijab, some had niqab. Manchester have more mosques than Manila. It was not hard to find halal food, they are available practically in every major market. In Quiapo, Manila where I grow up I witnessed multi-ethnicity, in Manchester it was multicultural. It was easy to adjust considering the people of different origins from all over the world. My cultural enrichment and education was thus considerably when I met Muslims and Europeans. Indeed, this experience had been a mind expanding exercise and had a tremendous effect on my outlook in life. Now, I can see the world in a bigger picture and I am not as judgmental as before of the west.

One of the best things that released me from possible loneliness and isolation was the internet. The emails are there from friends

and relatives to keep us posted. It surprises me to have simultaneous video conferences with them from Manila and Marawi City, Mindanao. At times, with my husband's brother who is a Fulbright Scholar at The Maxwell School, Syracuse University in New York and even in relatives who are overseas worker in Saudi Arabia, clearly the internet technology had made the world connected and smaller.

Looking back, I shall always treasure my learning experience and nourish it with continuous networking with classmates, friends and colleagues whom I met from all corners of the world. I can proudly say that what mattered most in my Chevening scholarship aside from gaining one of the best education in the world and having my family to share it with is the relationships with the people whose lives I have touched and who touched mine, making me a completely different person from what I was once was, this time a more informed, happier and wiser one.

(The author is a State Solicitor at the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG), she is also the founding president of Iqra (Read) Kiddie Learning Center in Quiapo, Manila. She is happily married to a fellow lawyer, Atty. Algamar A. Latiph and has a very lively and intelligent six year old daughter, Azezaa)

## ■ NATION FROM D1 muslimsacross thenation

gered by rampant logging in the adjoining watersheds, decreasing water level as a result of the six hydroelectric plants along the Agus River and uncontrolled trash and wastewater discharges. "The lake is headed for an environmental disaster that will adversely affect the lives of thousands of people living in the 18 towns and one city around it. Freshwater fish production is already dwindling rapidly," USAID said in a statement. Alarmed by the situation, Senator Loren Legarda filed House Bill 229 creating a Lake Lanao Development Authority. At the local level, the Lanao del Sur provincial government, the DENR in Muslim Mindanao, ECOGOV and the PMWC entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to improve management of the lake and its environs. Lake Lanao is the country's largest freshwater lake. Situated 702 meters above sea level in Lanao del Sur, Lake Lanao is fed by four rivers, covers an area of 355 square kilometers and has a depth of 60 to 112 meters. The lake is also the habitat of 18 native species of freshwater fish, and supports a large number of waterfowl. Fishing villages likewise thrive around the lake, which is a major source of subsistence.

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# Do Muslims laugh?

BY NASSER SHARIEF

**T**WO years ago Albert Brooks made a film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*. It flopped. The movie is yet another demonstration how non-Muslims especially the West are woefully ignorant about Muslims. Perhaps Muslims themselves are partly to blame. We do virtually nothing to set right wrong impressions against us. Do Muslims laugh? You bet! (Although we are not allowed to gamble)

The Prophet Muhammad himself often joked with his companions. Once, the Holy Prophet was leisurely eating dates with Ali seated in the desert. Whenever the Prophet looked away, Ali jokingly put his seeds on the pile of the Prophet until when they were finished, Ali said to the Prophet he had munched so much dates, pointing to the mound of seeds. The Prophet said, "Why, Ali, I didn't know you eat the seeds too!"

But the Prophet warned that, "Everything has a beginning and hostility begins with joking." The type of humor not allowed are the below-the-belt ones spawned in *Laffline*, *Timog* or *Punchline* along Quezon Avenue. Or satirical Danish cartoons.

The earliest and the most popular whimsical character was Mullah Nasruddin. People believed he was a Sufi who discovered laughter as a way of breaking from the all-too-serious subject of enlightenment. The oldest Manuscript of Mullah Nasruddin was found in 1571.

His tales traveled the world over and is being updated and given a new spin in modern times. He was

called Nasreddin Hoca in Turkey. Afghans, Iranians, Turks and Uzbeks claim Mullah Nasruddin as their own. Egyptians called him Joha.

When I browsed in my father's library shortly after his death several years ago, I found a joke contained in the very old manual of Joha, which Sheikh Ibrahim Ali had brought from Mecca:

The Sultan was visiting Joha's town, and he decided to put on a show for the locals. During the festivities, the Sultan summoned his best swordsmen before the crowd.

The first approached the stage with a little box, out of which a bee flew.

With a single zip of his sword, the bee fell sliced in two. The crowd cheered at the precision. The second approached with an-

other box, out of which a wasp flew out, then, with two swift blows of his sword, the wasp was cut into three rings. The crowd cheered. The third swordsman did a fly into four pieces. The crowd went wild.

Not to be outdone, Joha the homeboy rose to the occasion. He shuffled onto the stage amid the cheers of his home crowd, carrying a box in one hand and his sword in the other. As he opened his little box, a tiny mosquito flew out. Joha delivered a blow, but the mosquito continued to fly about, irritated but alive.

"A nice try, Joha," said the Sultan in a magnanimous, yet clearly disappointed tone, "but I see the mosquito is still alive!"

"When properly performed, circumcision is not supposed to kill, your Majesty!" replied Joha.

In the Philippines, he is known as "Abunawas" among the Tausogs, obviously a variant of "Abunawasi" in Swahili culture. And as usual, his character takes on a local color. A sampler:

Once, Abunawas was invited to deliver a *khutba* (sermon) in a mosque. When he got on the *mimbar* (pulpit), he asked the congregation "Do you know what I am going to say?" The audience, surprised at this

unusual question, chorused an emphatic "NO." So, shrugging, Abunawas announced "I really have no desire to speak to people who don't even know what I will be talking about" and he left.

The people felt embarrassed and called him back again the next Friday, and prepared an answer. When he asked the same question, the congregation replied "YES, WE DO". So Abunawas said, "Well, since you already know what I am about to say, I won't waste any more of your time" and he left.

Now the people were really perplexed. They decided to try one more tack and once again invited him to

speak. Again he posed the same question - "Do you know what I am going to say?" Now the people were well-prepared and so half of them answered "YES" while the other half replied "NO". So Abunawas said "The half who know what I am going to say, pray tell it to the other half" and he left.

Among Maranaos, the character became the bumbling trader who had left Lanao in search of greener pasture in the Christian cities and towns. He sells carpets portraying the Last Supper, imitation Ray Bans, and lately packs of DVD in his backpack.

He was a nameless character, although the late Maranao radio jock Kunug Pumbaya had christened him "Samir". Once, Samir

unwittingly finds himself in the yard of a convent in Cebu where many nuns were clustered chatting with the Mother Superior. Not wanting to waste an opportunity he approached the nun, "Misis, misis, buy my carpet. There is Jesus and his disciples having dinner." The Mother Superior did not seem want to notice him, so Samir tugged at her habit. "Misis, misis, buy my carpet. There is Jesus and his disciples having dinner." The nun, when she could no longer bear the tugging at her clothes, barked at the intruder, "Don't you dare call me Misis, you fool, you know I can't be married!" Samir innocently answered, "Then why would they call you mother if you're not a Misis?"



## Media forum assesses integration of MNLF combatants to AFP and PNP

THE continued hostilities in Muslim Mindanao, despite the signing of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), has rallied civil society groups and other stakeholders to call for a stronger push to end the fear and uncertainty brought by the continued conflict. One of the most crucial factors in doing this is to understand how and why the agreement has not led to the peace and development that it has promised.

Thus, the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Magbassa Kita Foundation hosted the 3rd ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY MEDIA FORUM on November 28, 2007 at Club Filipino in San Juan City which tackled the critical issues surrounding the integration of the former MNLF combatants back into the fold of Philippine society. The forum featured a study by Fatima Irene Rasul, former Secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry in ARMM. Col. Carlos Quita of the Armed Force of the Philippines (AFP) and Exec. Dir. Romulo Halabaso of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) were reactors to the said study.

Dubbed "PEACE AND INTEGRATION: LESSONS FROM THE GRP-MNLF EXPERIENCE," the study assessed the implementation of the peace agreement by focusing on the integration of the MNLF forces into the Armed Forces and the Police. The issue of the integration of combatants into the regular armed forces is one of the most crucial phases in ensuring the success of the implementation of peace agreements. The Philippine Government and the MNLF considered the integration of the MNLF forces into the AFP and the PNP as the most successful aspect of the peace agreement.

Ms. Rasul found that the process of integrating the MNLF into the AFP and the PNP generated positive results especially as regards the number of integratees - with more than 5,000 former MNLF already integrated. Another positive aspect of the program was the use of the integratees in serving as a vital and trusted link between the military and the community.

However, much remains to be done. Several MNLF and government officials point to different obstacles that have hindered the full implementation of the program. These include the non-compliance of standards in selecting the integratees, the weak "catch-up" education programs provided to the integratees, and the lack of funding from government to support the livelihood components for the families of these former combatants.

According to Ms. Rasul, "we need to understand why the integration has not been fully accomplished. This is crucial particularly in light of the peace talks between government and the MILF. The lessons we draw from the 1996 Peace Agreement regarding the integration of the former combatants of the MNLF can help in ensuring that the MILF program does not face the same problems."

## Of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Da Vinci Code: A Muslim view

BY NASSER SHARIEF

CHRISTMAS is fast approaching. How do Muslims feel about Jesus? It is so ironic that in today's information deluge brought about by the internet, many non-Muslims especially Christians are still woefully uninformed about how Muslims feel about Jesus and the Virgin Mary. When they hear for the first time how Islam treats Jesus and Mary they are invariably surprised, pleasantly.

*Moro Times* feels that because Christmas is just around the corner, a short glimpse on how Jesus and Mary is revered by Muslims is, perhaps, the best Christmas present we can give our readers.

### The Good News

The spirit of 'charity' which the Muslim displays towards Jesus and his mother Mary spring from the fountainhead of his faith: the Holy Qur'an. In the Qur'an Jesus is mentioned no less than twenty five times. Some samplers: "We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit" (Qur'an 2:87); "O Mary! God giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary..." (3:45); "...And in their foot steps we sent Jesus the son of Mary..." (5:46) "And Zakariya and John, and Jesus and Elias: all in the ranks of the righteous." (6:85)

In the Qur'an Jesus is referred to as Eesa, its proper name in Arabic, or Esau in Hebrew, the two sister languages being Semitic. Mary is Mariam.

### Mary's birth

According to the Qur'an, Mary's father was Imran and her mother was Hannah. Mary's story begins while she was still in her mother's womb. The mother of Mary said, "O my Lord! I dedicate into Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me." (Qur'an 3:35). When Mary was delivered, Hannah was surprised that it was a girl. She had had expected her baby to be a boy who would grow up to be a

scholar or a religious leader. Qur'an 3:36 continues "...and God knew best what she brought forth — 'And no wise is the male like the female. I have named her Maryam (Mary).'"

Mary was assigned into the care of a priest named Zacharias (Zakariya). "Every time that he entered (her) chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said, 'O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?' She said, 'From God. For God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.'" (Qur'an 3:37).

### The virgin birth: No magi, no manger

The Qur'an declares that Jesus was the result of a virgin birth, but describes Mary and her son not as divine, but as "honored servants" (21:26). The most detailed account of the annunciation and birth of Jesus are provided in Sura 3 and 19 of The Qur'an:

Mary asked: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" (Qur'an 19:20). The Angel Gabriel said: "So (it will be): thy Lord saith, 'That is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us.' It is a matter (so) decreed." (Qur'an 19:21). Mary then becomes pregnant.

After conceiving Jesus, Mary went away with the baby to a distant place (Qur'an 19:22). "And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. She cried (in her anguish): 'Ah! would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten!'" (Qur'an 19:23). Joseph, the magi, and manger are not mentioned in the Qur'an. God was Mary's only Provider.

However, Muslims do not accept the virgin birth of Jesus as evidence of Jesus' divinity. "The similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: 'Be.' And he was." (Qur'an 3:59).

The Qur'an also declares that one of the reasons for the punishments of God upon the People of the Book

is for their "uttering a monstrous lie against Mary" (4:156). This is understood by some to refer to the accusations of wanton unchastity which was directed by some against Mary in her lifetime and which (Jewish sources consider to be anti-Semitic) interpretations recorded in the Talmud. In fact the Qur'an includes Christians, Jews (including Karaites and Samaritans), "Sabians" (a Qur'anic term interpreted to refer to the Mandaeans) and Zoroastrians among the People of the Book.

Sura 5 Signs 116-119 of The Qur'an includes the Prophecy of the Judgment Day where "Jesus son of Mary" will be questioned by God as regards those who worship him and Mary, and that Jesus will deny them:

"I said nothing to them except that which Thou didst command me - Worship God (Allah), my Lord and your Lord. And I was a witness over them as long as I remained among them, but since Thou didst cause me to die, Thou, hast been the Watcher over them, and Thou art Witness over all things. If Thou punish them, they are Thy servants; and if Thou forgive them, Thou surely art the Mighty, the Wise."

This is an affirmation of what Jesus said in Mark 12:29: "The first is, Hear O Israel: 'The Lord our God, the Lord is One.'"

### Her dignity

Holy Virgin Mary is one of the four most highly regarded women to have ever lived. A chapter in the Qur'an was to her name, which not even the Bible can boast of. Several verses in the Qur'an praising her and exalting that she was an extremely chaste and pious woman. The other three women are: Bithiah (Asiyah in Arabic), foster mother of Prophet Moses (Musa) and wife of Pharaoh. Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, wife of Prophet Muhammad. Fatimah bint Muhammad, daughter of Prophet Muhammad. Mary (Mariam), is known and respected by hundreds of millions of Muslims.

### The Da Vinci Code

What about the Da Vinci Code novel?

The Christian Church has been so unsettled by the issue of whether Jesus had married Mary Magdalene that tomes of books were issued to defend the faith. Why there seem to be no parallel outrage in the Muslim world? Is it because a marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene (or any woman) would point out to his being a human, affirming what the Qur'an says about Jesus?

Dan Brown or rather the novel's character Langdon continues proving that it was against Jewish custom for a man to remain a bachelor. Islam also has no record of Jesus being married. Similarly, there are no records that Jesus didn't marry.

Brown says that the Church hid this historical record because Jesus' marriage with Mary Magdalene proves Jesus' earthly nature, and being not divine as the Church wanted him to be. But why deny this when the Church readily accepts Jesus' other earthly qualities like eating and drinking, sleeping, etc.

The bulk of Dan Brown's material was culled from the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* which got banned in the Philippines in the early 70s (Dan Brown was sued by the authors but he got away scot-free). *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is replete with stories and accounts of Templars and Knights. These are secret societies that spawned Masonry and its offshoots. When I happened to peruse the material in the 80s abroad, a thing ran in my mind that it could provide for a great material for a novel. I was mesmerized by the accounts especially because I happened to research that many Knight Templars who traveled with the crusaders to Muslim lands were influenced by Islamic Sufis. These Sufi practices, taken out of context, led to freemasonry and other secret societies.

There are many commonalities between Islam and Christianity — they being of the Abrahamic faith. The Crusade is past behind us. The 'clash of civilizations' is yet another attempt to muddle our minds. Muslims and Christians should be talking about this over a cup of coffee in Starbucks.