

DIALOGUES IN MADRID FORUM

# Clash or alliance of civilizations?

BY AMINA RASUL EDITOR

**A**FTER 9/11, as the United States government prepared to declare war on terrorism, the term "clash of civilizations" caught fire as a logical explanation to the tragedy. The "clash of civilizations" was the thesis proposed by Dr. Samuel P. Huntington, identifying cultural and religious identities as the sources of global conflict. Islam became suspect.

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) was established in 2005 with the aim of improving understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism that have plagued the relationship of the United States and its allies with the Islamic communities.

AoC was the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the United Nations. Accepted formally by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on July 14, 2005, the Alliance has been, since then, an initiative of the Secretary-General.

The AoC is also supported by a Group of Friends—a community of over 80 member countries and international organizations and bodies.

The first forum of the Alliance of Civilization was convened on January 15 to 16, 2008 at Madrid, Spain, with hopes of improving dialogue and understanding be-

tween Western and Muslim countries. Around 350 delegates, including government members, representatives of international organizations and civil societies attended the forum. Invited to represent the Philippines were Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo, Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI, and *Moro Times* Editor Amina Rasul.

In his remarks, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon said: "The Alliance of Civilizations is an important way to counter extremism and heal the divisions that threaten our world."

The President of the Government of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero for his part stated: "The Alliance of Civilizations aspires to build bridges that can help us to manage the differences existing in the world, particularly those linked to religious or cultural issues."

President Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal and High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, said in concluding the forum: "So many responsibilities



■ In the Madrid AoC forum Queen Noor of Jordan (left) announced a US\$100-million fund for the production and distribution of enlightening films and Sheikhha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned of Qatar announced a US\$100-million fund for a global youth employment initiative.

ahead of us show that the Alliance is the right initiative at the right moment. Urgent action is needed to stop further degradation of human atmosphere. Let's keep united and firm in our certainty that we can change the world."

Initiatives launched at the Forum included the following.

- Announcement of national and regional strategies for cross cultural dialogue by governments and multilateral organizations to advance AoC objectives in their respective countries and regions.
- Discussions at the policymaking

level that highlight the importance to move the *Alliance forward in 2008* such as: developing joint multi-stakeholders initiatives at the regional level aimed at promoting a better inter-cultural understanding, and preventing the mounting of tensions and the rise of extremism.

- Establishment of partnership agreements, with various multilateral agencies and organizations, such as UNESCO, the League of Arab States, ISESCO, ALECSO and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) - and the Council of Europe.
- Launch of a Rapid Response Me-

dia Mechanism beginning with an online resource that will feature a list of global experts in cross-cultural issues, who are available to comment or to talk to journalists, particularly in times of major cross-cultural crises. *Moro Times* Editor Amina Rasul is a part of this initiative.

- Establishment of a Youth Solidarity Fund aimed at providing grants to support youth-led programs in the areas of intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Moreover, a decision was made to strengthen the network of youth participants that attended the AoC Forum and

broaden the network to include other youth.

- Creation of a global network of philanthropic foundations and private funders, which will share information; raise awareness of ongoing initiatives, identify mutual needs; and explore ways to leverage existing resources for greatest impact.

## Global Youth Initiative and Media Funds

It was fascinating to observe two Muslim women of privilege make a difference in the AoC Forum, launching a \$100million investment in a Global Youth Employment Initiative and a multi-million dollar Media Fund as the key initiatives at the Madrid Forum.

H.H. Sheikhha Mozah bint Nasser-el-Missned announced a \$100-million investment in Silatech, a global youth employment initiative aimed, she said, at "connecting young people to each other, to capital, to industry, to opportunity."

The Sheikhha called for action as she pronounced, "Enough talk!" Her Highness added, "By investing in our youth, we are investing in the security of our nations, and only secure and confident nations can build alliances based on mutual respect and common objectives."

The Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund on the other hand was launched by HM Queen Noor, who stated: "we are announcing a \$100-million Fund to support the production and distribution of films that entertain as well as enlighten—films that will enhance the connections that already exist between different societies, but are seldom noted on screen and in popular culture."

Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, who proposed the initiative at the UN General Assembly in 2004, encapsulated the hope that the AoC would avert the "predicted clash of civilizations by promoting security, understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect in a globalized world."

## People Power acts to prevent outbreak of war

BY NORODIN M. MAKALAY

ALARMED over the rising tensions between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), thousands marched nationwide in key Philippine cities to press both sides to return to the negotiating table. As both military personnel and MILF are on full alert in conflict-affected areas in Central Mindanao, religious and civil society groups moved to prevent the renewal of a war that has claimed more than 100,000 lives already.

In unprecedented moves uniting civilians, religious leaders, MNLF and MILF sympathizers, the peace rallies have been organized in the cities of Manila, Cotabato, Marawi, General Santos and Iligan to break the most serious impasse in the peace talks since negotiations started in 1997.

Rallies are to be launched in Basilan, Pagadian, Zamboanga and Sulu in the coming months.

More than 500 children coming from the different Islamic schools (*madrasah*) in Barangay Maharlika, Taguig, on January 19 wore green bands (color of Islam) and waved flags, calling for peace in Mindanao in Islamic New Year celebrations (*Amoon Jadeed*).

In Marawi City, civilians filled the public plaza wearing red bands and raised flags with the word, *Allahuakbar* (Allah is Great).

Foreign observers from the Organization of the Islamic Conference and donor communities have also expressed concern over the instability in the peace process.

Talks between the government and the MILF hit a snag in December over disagreements on the coverage of ancestral domain and subjecting it to constitutional process.

After the "all-out war" of 2000, negotiations had progressed as a result of mutual agreement that the government would not refer to "Constitutional requirements" and the MILF would not demand independence.

Secretary Jesus Dureza, the presidential adviser on the peace process, assessed the impasse as "among the most serious to stall the rocky talks, a big hump" upon which the GRP has no "magic formula" while "looking for a way out."

The MILF negotiating panel refused to meet its government coun-

terpart during the 15th exploratory talks last December 15 to 17 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, because the GRP draft of a proposed memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain supposedly did not contain certain consensus points earlier agreed by the two parties. The government negotiating panel reportedly inserted a provision which states that the implementation of the agreement will have to follow "constitutional process."

The setting up of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) had been agreed upon by government and MILF negotiators during exploratory talks in Kuala Lumpur in November last year.

The situation has been aggravated by statements from some of the president's key officials threatening the MILF with sanctions. Secretary Ronaldo Puno Puno was quoted saying government should not give in to the MILF's demand for a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) without a plebiscite. AFP Vice Chief Lt. Gen. Antonio Romero stated a condition that peace talks will not continue without disarming the MILF. The Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC) considers the Ancestral Domain agenda in the GRP-MILF peace talks as an "opportunity for Mindanawons to revisit our colonial past and correct the historical injustices committed against the indigenous and Bangsamoro peoples in Mindanao."

"The peaceful lives of the Bangsamoro were shattered by the tremors brought about by the coming of the colonizers," said Sammy Maulana, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS) secretary-general. "We are not begging for anything from the Government, we just want to regain our homeland and restore our inalienable rights to self determination, both as people and a nation."

Bobby Benito of the CBCS (Cotabato City) said there is no doubt that the failure of peace talks will lead to violence, chaos and war. "But the people are tired of war. It is anti-people and violates the very core values of all religions and civil society: love, peace, nonviolence."

"We, in the civil society are aware of the fact that majority of people in the grassroots desire a meaningful result of

## OFWs in S. Arabia: Old partner, new challenges

BY NASSER SHARIEF

**JEDDAH:** Focused on the Abu Sayyaf, the so-called fight against terrorism, and the never-ending drafting and redrafting of agreements with the rebels in the South, Juan de la Cruz is made to believe that these taken together is all there is to expect from the Muslim world.

What doubles the pain is that the Philippines has been sending its sons and daughters to the Middle East by the millions since the 70s. Many influential princes and princesses here have grown up with Filipino *yayas* and can speak Tagalog fluently!

This situation was lamented by Abdul Aziz H. Elwattar, Manager of Media Relations of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry when *Moro Times* paid him a courtesy visit in his office. "It's odd," he said, "that when your President Gloria Arroyo came, she kept harping on more jobs for Filipinos here when you could have gotten the big contracts for businesses and attracted investment funds for the Philippines."

Elwattar said that Filipinos ought to bargain for more considering the huge contribution they have made in building up the cities and industries in the Middle East. Korea, for example, which has skeletal setups, get many business contracts here.

### Investment from surpluses

The Kingdom, due to the continuous slide of the US dollar, is poised to administer its own Sovereign Fund which seeks to reinvest its surpluses. The Kingdom has about \$266 billion (1 trillion Saudi Riyal) in surplus.

Most government surpluses are currently invested in US Treasury bonds. Dr. Said Al-Shaikh, chief economist of the National Commercial Bank, proposed diversifying these funds across asset types, countries, and various currencies. This development came in the wake of successful administering of other



■ Nurses from the Philippines are among the most appreciated foreign professional workers in Saudi Arabia.

in the Gulf region.

The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority has an estimated asset of \$875 billion and the Kuwait Future Generations Fund has about \$250 billion. Through all these, the Philippines, unlike its neighbors like Malaysia, has yet to witness a trickling of investments from these emerging funds.

### Laidback stance rued

Philippine Consul General Ezzedin H. Tago, also lamented the laidback stance of Philippine businesses in the Gulf and the Kingdom in particular. Tago, who grew up in Jeddah in the 80s, said, "we have to be creative and a bit aggressive in wrapping up billion-dollar contracts, in finding markets for our products and services, and in drawing investments to our country. The time

when we would just wind up as manpower suppliers is a thing of the past. The milieu is changing faster than we realize."

"We want the big corporate names in the Philippines to gain footholds here, especially since there is a wide opening up of opportunities for foreign business outfits to operate here independent of local sponsors," he added.

The Philippine National Bank, leader in the remittance operations for the Middle East, is buoyant about Philippine business prospects. Amroussi Rasul, PNB Vice-President for the Middle East and chairman of the Philippines-Dubai Chamber of Commerce, has been encouraging OFWs to invest in real estate and hopes that more Philippine businesses will enter the region.

### Construction boom

With a land area of one quarter of the United States, Saudi Arabia has lined up more construction projects: hotels, housing projects, golf courses, equestrian, marinas and fishing and diving resorts along the Red Sea coast.

The Obhor Creek, which was once an obscure beach north of Jeddah, now teems with white-sailed yachts and boats. Alexander Macabanding, a Filipino engineer who oversees constructions works for the National Commercial Bank, said that the Farasan Island near the mouth of the Red Sea is crowded with land developers and constructions there are in full blast.

Other Arab countries, especially the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, are also in the midst of a construction boom, attracting foreign investors. ➤ **ChallengesD2**

■ Filipino doctors are respected all over the Middle East but most of all, many observers notice, in the Kingdom.



## Hijrah and the Islamic new year

BY PROF. MONER M. BAJUNAID  
JIHADIST

*Hijrah should be a continuous phenomenon in our life – not only moving physically toward the destination but being transformed away from the carnal desires toward the mercy of Allah's acceptance*

THE word *hijrah* signifies leaving a place to seek sanctuary or freedom from persecution for reason of being Muslim. Hijrah can also mean to leave a bad way of life for a good or more righteous way. The *muhajireen*—those who had migrated with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to Madinah (old name: Yathrib)—is a derivative of this word.

The *muhajireen* are called this name because they left their lands and dwelling places for the sake of Allah. And they migrated to a land where they had no family or possessions. The Prophet had preached Islam in Makkah for thirteen years, but not without opposition from the rulers of Makkah who worshipped many gods rather than the One God (Allah).

As the opposition to Islam grew stronger, an economic boycott was staged against the early Muslims. Fearful for their safety, the Prophet sent some of his followers and companions (*sahabah*) to Ethiopia, where the Christian ruler extended protection to them. In the reckoning of some historians, this was the first hijrah. But the persecution worsened in Makkah, and the early followers of Islam were harassed, abused, and even tortured. Then suddenly a small delegation from the oases of Yathrib, some 400 miles north of Makkah, came to meet with the Prophet.

Before him, they all embraced Islam and pledged support to the Prophet and their new religion. Upon returning to Yathrib, they preached Islam to every household in their community. The following year, a larger delegation traveled to Makkah and pledged their support to the Prophet and agreed to grant him protection in Yathrib.

The Prophet urged his companions to emigrate to Yathrib, while he himself became the last to leave his hometown with his closest friend, Abu Bakr as-Siddiq. Later, in the early fall of 622, he and Abu Bakr set off to join the emigrants in Yathrib.

The hijrah of the Prophet was later taken as the starting point of Muslim chronology. According to tradition, the hijrah of the Prophet took place in September 622. Upon arriving in Yathrib (henceforth called al-Madinah, the City), the Prophet sought to establish two important pillars of the new Muslim community: building of a *masjid* (mosque) and binding true ties of brotherhood between the *muhajireen* and the host community of helpers known as the *ansar*.

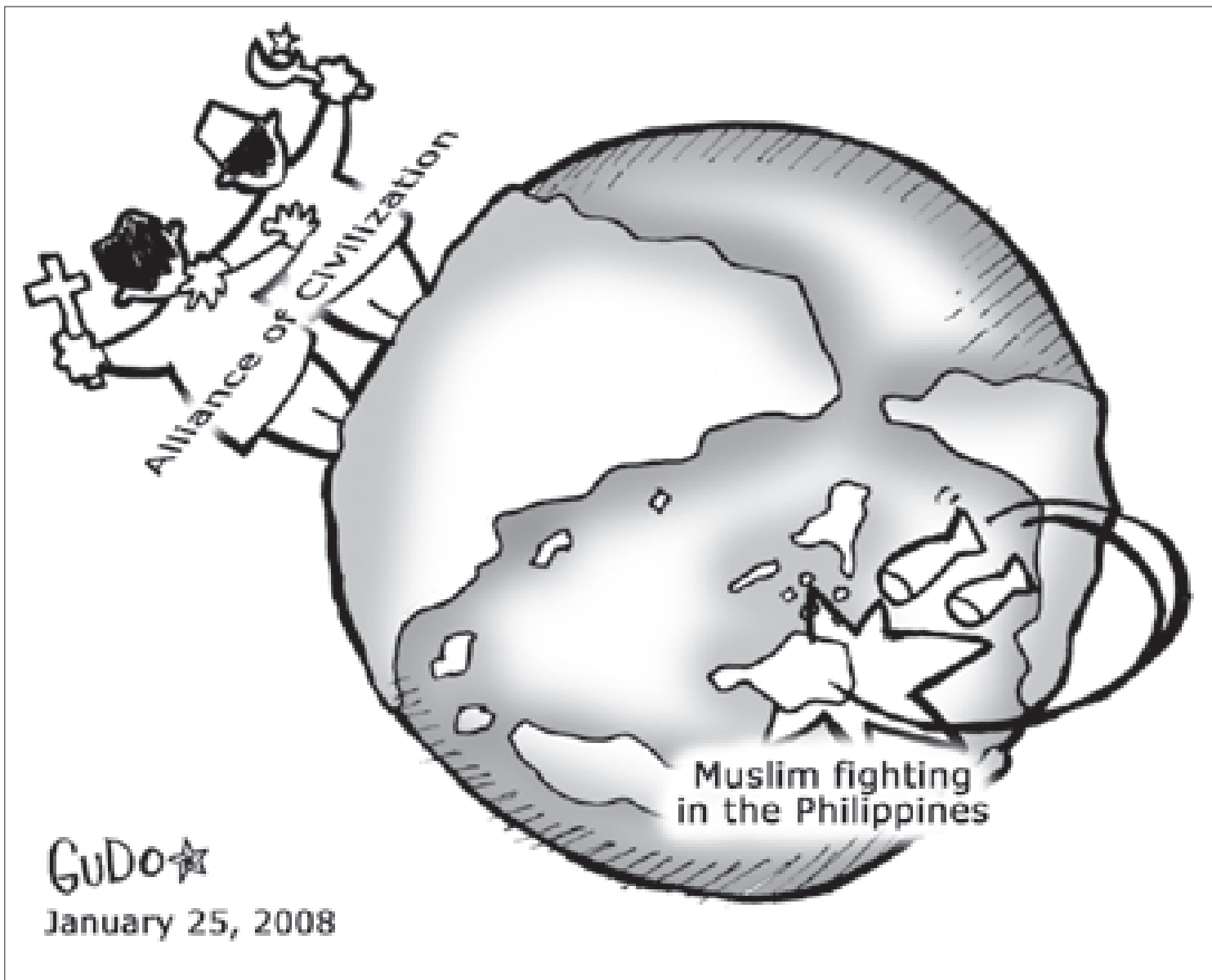
The *masjid* became not only a place of worship but a place of learning, a *madrasah*. It is also here where the Prophet (s.a.w.) established the center of government for the new Muslim state. The hijrah of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) is sometimes inaccurately translated as "flight." In truth, the hijrah was a carefully planned migration which marks not only the beginning of the Islamic era but also, for the Muslims, a new way of life. Henceforth, the organizational framework of the Muslim community, or *ummah*, was not to be based on mere blood kinship, but on the greater brotherhood of all Muslims, male or female.

Hijrah as one can glean from the Qur'an is much more than leaving one place to another. In *Surah al-Ankabut*, Allah tells us what Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) said: "Verily, I am turning [*hijrah*] towards my Lord." This part of the verse (*ayah*) teaches us the true meaning of hijrah where Allah is the ultimate destination, and we, Allah's servants, are the travelers.

In this sense, hijrah should be a continuous phenomenon in our life—not only physically moving towards the destination but rather making transformation away from the carnal desires, and go by the virtue of hijrah through migration of the heart towards the mercy of Allah's acceptance.

Migration of the heart, however, is a gradual process that is the result of a continuous training (*tarbiyyah*) based on proper understanding of *aqeedah* (set of beliefs), and submission to the Oneness of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Quiet often, Muslims fail to understand that the most essential pillar to apply in their life is the first one: *La illaha illallah, Muhammadun rasulullah*, there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.

(Moner Bajunaid is the Executive Director of Mindanao Integrated Network Development (MIND) Center, Cotabato City. A former Chancellor of Mindanao State University- General Santos City, Bajunaid is Convener of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID) and is Regional Co-ordinator of the Empowering the Ulama Project (PCID).)



## Negotiating the southern problem

BY DATU DINN PIANG AMPATUAN

**THE Philippine government (GRP) and the Moros need three consensus tools to successfully work out a political settlement acceptable to the people of Mindanao.**

Firstly, there is a need for paradigm shift on the part of Philippine society and the Moros. The majority must trust the Moros and accept them as part of the nation once given to heal their feeling of alienation. Likewise, the Moros will need to accept that they are part and parcel of the Philippine society and start to feel and act like citizens.

Secondly, there is a need to unify and achieve political consensus among the four gate keepers of peace in Southern Philippines—the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leadership, the traditional leaders (Sultan/Datus), and the leaders of the affected Christian provinces.

Lastly, the international community especially the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the United States of America (USA) are needed to play a mediating and constructive role.

The OIC, which has been a dismal failure in mediating the conflict, must show its resolve to invest its resources in terms of funds and expand its diplomatic pressure to ensure that both parties abide by any peace agreement.

The Asean states, who have been a passive spectator to the tragedy of more than 100,000 people killed in the conflict, must help in the process. For instance, Singapore, which has a successful administration of its Singaporean

minority Muslim communities, can help in governance. This can be in sharing its experience in developing a Singaporean Muslim Identity in a Multi-cultural society. This may include the areas of the mainstreaming of Madrasah Education, and the Singapore handling of separation of State and Islamic religious practices.

The United States of America (USA) and other countries such as Australia and Japan can help in setting up educational and political institutions that will help the Moros develop its leadership and human resources capability.

The MILF predicts a grim scenario if the GRP and the MILF peace process in Southern Philippines will not be salvaged. The MILF claimed in its official website ([www.luwaran.com](http://www.luwaran.com)) that the stalled peace talk is helping MILF hardliners opposed to the peace process wrestle power and influence among its ranks.

Incidents of military-rebel clashes in Datu Piang and an NPC tower sabotaging in Lanao del Norte speak of the fragile status quo between the two parties. The subordinate units of both sides, who have local unsettled differences, suggest the likelihood of provocation and escalation. Lest one forget, the Philippine Marines, who have suffered humiliating (beheaded) casualties in Basilan, may want to settle scores with the MILF operating untouched because of the peace process. Both parties are holding the trigger of their weapons, ready to fire on a slight provocation.

There are two scenarios in the future of security in Southern Philippines. The first is a situation wherein the peace process finally breaks down with an escalation of conflict between the military and the MILF. The second scenario is when the government pushes for the constitutional change to establish a framework that could accommodate the demand of the MILF and other stakeholders—MNLF, the Moro traditional leaders and ensure the protection of the rights of the affected Christian communities. The first scenario is preventable but this is very likely, considering the volatility of the situation. In an event of an all out war, it will likely create a scenario that the whole secessionist groups will unite on one front and return to the struggle for independence and fight a hard attrition warfare.

The MILF may resort to a tactical alliance with the MNLF Misuari Group and the Abu Sayyaf Group. The MNLF which is concentrated in Sulu, the ASG in Basilan and the MILF in Central Mindanao will not pose an operational problem. Given the fact that the frontrunners of the different movements are old cadres of the then-undivided MNLF, unification is possible. The immediate implication of the condition of the first scenario is the derailment of any gain of the counter-terrorism efforts of the Philippine government. It might also open a new front for the Jihadists in the region, similar to the situation in the year 2000 wherein Indonesian JI presence was significantly felt in Southern Philippines.

The second scenario is what will prevent the peace process from breaking down. The Philippine government can accommodate the MILF demand of self-rule under a federal system.

This will be a tedious and long process.

First, the proposal has to be deliberated in an unsupportive Philippine Senate, which has been doubtful of the intention of the government to change the Constitution.

Second, a Christian majority Congress has expressed opposition to any expansion of the areas of the current autonomous region. One clear complication would be the proposed inclusion of more than a thousand Muslim communities in the Christian dominated provinces into the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE).

This early, two governors of Christian dominated provinces—Jesus Sacdalan, (North Cotabato) and Daisy Avance Fuentes, (South Cotabato)—have expressed opposition to any agreement reached without public (Christian) consultation.

Third, it has to find political accommodations for affected elected influential local chief executives (Moro Sultans and Datus) of ARMM.

Fourth, it has to contend with the MNLF, which entered into an earlier agreement with the Philippine government, whose members have renewed hostilities with the government and have established tactical alliance with US-designated terrorist ASG. If one has to examine this process, one wonders whether a solution is possible.

In the end, both parties—government and the MILF—have to meet head on. The dividends of peace will benefit everybody, both the Philippine society and the Moros. Peace will usher in stability, necessary to defeat terrorism and extremism.

(The author is an Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is a native of Maguindanao.)

### » ANNOUNCEMENTS: WHAT'S UP, MORO?

THE Alliance of Muslim Advocates of Law (AMAL) invites articles to be published in the *Bangsamoro Law Journal*. BLJ aims to highlight major legal and political issues confronting the Muslims in the Philippines. The first issue's theme is "The Bangsamoro and the Existing Legal and Political Framework." Email [johaira.C.Wahab@jawahab@yahoo.com](mailto:johaira.C.Wahab@jawahab@yahoo.com).

MANILA City Jail Chaplain Abdurahman Taher invites donations in kind – clothes, toiletries or food – for the more than 300 Muslim detainees in Manila City Jail. Contact 09104177827.

ANVIL Publishing through editor Gutierrez Mangansakan invites contributions to a SECOND ANTHOLOGY of Essays by Young Moro Writers to be released in 2009. Email contributions to [morofilm@yahoo.com](mailto:morofilm@yahoo.com)

### ■ WAR FROM D1

## People Power acts to prevent outbreak of war

the peace process, not only to put an end to the ravages of war, but to address the longstanding political problem in a nonviolent way," Benito added.

Pastor Frank Bantilan of General Santos City said that the indigenous people of Mindanao have been distressed by the sudden impasse in the peace talks. "Muslims and Lumads [indigenous people] are more than brothers, we feel no different pain," he said.

From Marawi City, Lacs Dalidig of the Movement for Multi-Sectoral Peace and Development, said, "The failure of peace agreements in the past can be attributed mainly to the nonparticipation of the Bangsamoro people, because nonparticipation means they do not own a peace agreement. As real stakeholders, their collective voice should be basis of authority and the last word in the solution of the problem."

In September 1996, the Philippine

### ■ CHALLENGES FROM D1

## OFWs in Saudi Arabia

### Changing lifestyle

Shopping malls are sprawling everywhere and more are work-in-progress. Forget about the old Balad of downtown Jeddah, which used to be the only rendezvous for OFWs on weekends in the 80s. Here, four malls occupy the four corners of a road intersection.

With growing commercialization comes changing lifestyles. The young generation, born in affluence, has no memories of Bedouin life. Students now come back from Europe with new ideas about life. Young men shed off their traditional thoub and headgear in favor of Armani jeans and Benetton shirts.

Old taboos are slowly set aside. At the Chamber of Commerce we have visited, they have women staff hunched on laptops doing office chores. It is also reported that women can now drive cars with the consent of their guardians although I still have to see one on the road.

### Ageing OFWs

Unlike in Dubai and other Gulf countries, many Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia are past forty, a legacy of the oil-boom period of the eighties. They have lingered on, offered better pay packages by their happy employers. Lately, the Kingdom has been limiting the number of new visas for foreign workers, trying to encourage more locals into the workforce. Unfortunately, the Philippines' main export to the Middle East remains to be manpower.

The conditions of Filipinos working in the Kingdom have improved generally. However, nostalgia and pining for life back home remain strong (but not as acute as it used to be). Here, we have the Internet, the cellphone, and the almighty TFC (The Filipino Channel) to connect OFWs with home.

In a typical Filipino household here, the TV screen is turned-on the whole day even when nobody is watching as background ambience akin to wallpaper on a computer screen.

The Manila Times  
the moroTimes

JOAQUIN C. ROCES JR  
Publisher

DANTE FRANCIS M. ANG II  
Executive Editor/  
President and CEO

RENE Q. BAS  
Editor in Chief

AMINA RASUL  
Editor

SAMIRA GUTOC-TOMAWIS  
Managing Editor

NASSER SHARIEF  
ALIYYA SAWADJAAN  
Editorial Team

BRIAN M. AFUANG  
Art Director

Telephone 524-5665 to 67  
Telefax 521-6897 • 521-6872  
Subscription 528-1319

[www.manilatimes.net](http://www.manilatimes.net)  
E-mail [newsboy@manilatimes.net](mailto:newsboy@manilatimes.net)

The Moro Times is published by Manila Times monthly at 371 A. Bonifacio Drive, Port Area, Manila, 1018

T1-20, Governors Place  
Condominium, Shaw Blvd.,  
Mandaluyong City  
Telefax 532-6058  
E-mail: [mkffi@pltdtdsl.net](mailto:mkffi@pltdtdsl.net)

»feature

# Iraq's graveyard even the living dream about

**N**AJAF, Iraq: The dearest wish of Reza Moussaoui, an Iranian Shiite pilgrim who crossed the border to attend weekend Ashura rituals in Iraq's shrine city of Najaf, is to be able to die.

His eyes filled with tears, Reza stands next to a mound of travel bags as he waits to board a bus that will take him back to Isfahan, the ancient Persian capital. But his heart is not in the journey.

He leaves behind him, near the seedy hotel where he has been staying, the place where he wants to rest forever in peace—Wadi Salam, the largest cemetery of the Muslim world.

The retired craftsman spent four days in Najaf with a group of pious companions attending rituals commemorating the slaying of the revered Imam Hussein by the armies of the Sunni caliph Yazid in 680.

He says he spent time praying in the golden-domed mosque, which protects the remains of Ali, father of Imam Hussein and cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ali founded Shiism at the time of the death in 632 of the Prophet Muhammad in response to a dispute over who would succeed him.

Reza says he had also joined in a self-flagellation procession on Saturday, the climax of the 10-day Ashura ceremonies.

"Of course I am happy," he says, despite his tears, "but what I really want is to be buried close to the Imam Ali. And the only way would have been for me to die during the pilgrimage."

In spite of the good relations between the two neighbors, administrative difficulties and the high costs of transport make it almost impossible for Iranian Shiites to be buried at Najaf, unless they die on the spot.



■ A partial view shows the cemetery of the Shiite holy city of Najaf in central Iraq. The Wadi al-Salam (Valley of Peace) in Najaf is one of the largest cemeteries in the world. Millions of Shiite Muslims over the centuries have been brought there for burial from all over the world, making of the desert valley a "city of the dead." AFP PHOTO

Steady on his legs, Reza, in his early sixties, does not look destined for a premature end as he finally climbs into the bus for the 12-hour journey home.

The necropolis of Wadi Salam (valley of peace) stretches as far as the eye can see—tight lines of ochre brick tombs broken occasionally by more elaborate tombs shaped like mosques.

There is no way of knowing how many graves there are in the cemetery, says Abu Saif Najah, one of the oldest gravediggers of Najaf. "Some say five million, others say 20 million, but only God really knows."

The tradition of being buried in this corner of the desert dates from the eighth century, after the caliph at the time, Harun al-Rashid, had discovered during a hunting trip the well-kept secret that the remains of Ali were buried there.

Since then, Shiites have believed that being buried near the shrine of Ali will bring them spiritual rewards.

"All Shiites think that because of Imam Ali they will get quicker access to paradise, and they want to be buried with their faces toward his mosque," said Najah, adding that

not only Iraqis are buried in the cemetery.

"We have people from as far away as Azerbaijan, Muscat, Oman and Saudi Arabia," he said.

Taking care of the 200 bodies which on average arrive for burial each day, for a fee of 200,000 dinars (about \$165), are some 90 funeral parlors which have been operating for generations from small offices in the center of the cemetery.

The name of the gravedigger and of the tribe for whom he works is scrawled on the stripped plaster frontages of each office.

Without these undertakers, nobody would have a clue how to find the burial site allocated to their family, or to their tribe.

"There is no map of Wadi Salam," laughingly explains another gravedigger, Imad al-Ansari, while helping a customer search for the grave of his father.

Ansari glides without difficulty through the narrow sandy lanes bordering the low, square burial sites, giving the impression of a giant crossing a miniature city that has been frozen in time.

He leads his visitor towards a

batch of new graves near the sea of Najaf, a vast salt lake that extends toward the west, and beyond that, into the desert.

"There is no lack of space if the Iranians want to be buried here," Ansari says, referring to Reza Moussaoui's expressed wishes. "But this must be organized between governments, it is a matter beyond our jurisdiction."

He adds wryly, referring to the fact that the graveyard is getting closer to the lake each day, "We can offer the Iranians a grave with a view of the lake." AFP

## SAUDI-SOCIETY-WOMEN

### Unchaperoned Saudi women can stay in hotels

**RIYADH, Saudi Arabia:** Saudi women will in future be allowed to stay in hotels unchaperoned under a royal decree issued in the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom, a rights organization said.

"We have become aware of a royal decree authorizing Saudi women to stay in hotels without being accompanied by a 'mahram,' a chaperon, the vice-president of the independent National Human Rights Association (NHRA), Mufleh al-Qahtani, told Agence France-Presse on Tuesday.

He said that from now on, the management of a hotel will be content with asking unaccompanied female Saudi guests "to present an identity card and give their names to the police," he added.

"This is a step in the right direction

for more women's rights," said Qahtani of restrictions that also preclude women from driving or traveling abroad unless they are with their husband or another close male relative.

He said "sensitive progress" was being made in the field of women's rights, and added that his group had "raised this situation with the authorities."

The manager of one Riyadh hotel confirmed to Agence France-Presse that he knew of a circular from the commerce and industry ministry lifting restrictions on women unaccompanied by a "mahram" from registering as guests.

Asking that his name not be used, the manager said the circular stipulated that the woman "have an identity card

bearing her photograph" and the hotel management inform the nearest police station and also provide officers with a photocopy of her ID card.

The measure will come as a boon to those Saudi businesswomen who have been unable to register at hotels without a chaperon.

Saudi Arabia applies a strict form of Sunni Islam known as "Wahhabism," which follows the interpretations of 18th century scholar Muhammed bin Abdul Wahhab.

In addition to not being allowed to drive or travel unless accompanied by a male relative, women in the desert kingdom that sits on a quarter of world oil reserves are also forced to cover themselves from head to toe in public. AFP



■ An Afghan man buys newspapers at a roadside stall in Kabul on Wednesday. A court in devoutly Islamic Afghanistan has sentenced a local journalist to death for blasphemy, an official and family members said. AFP PHOTO

### Afghanistan sets up bodies to strengthen rights of women

**KABUL, Afghanistan:** The Afghanistan Ministry for Women Affairs has launched two new bodies to protect women rights and strengthen their status in the post-Taliban nation, a local newspaper reported recently.

The organizations titled "Healthy Family, Happy Society" and "Law and Women" are aimed at eliminating violence against women and helping establish a healthy and prosperous society, daily *Afghanistan Times* quoted Minister for Women Affairs Hosn Bano Ghazanfar as saying.

The Healthy Family, Happy Society would be carried out by religious leaders in several provinces of the country to give awareness on women rights, while the second body the Law and Women would be run by lawyers and prosecutors, the minister added.

Lawyers and prosecutors will, by publishing posters and launching informative campaigns, highlight the right of women envisaged in the country's constitution and guaranteed by Islam, the religion of Afghans.

Women during the six-year reign of Taliban regime toppled in late 2001 almost had no right as the hard-line movement had confined them to houses and closed girl schools.

However, in the post-Taliban era women have more freedom as they serve as parliamentarians, politicians, teachers and even ministers.

Nevertheless, women in war-ravaged country are still facing enormous problems as vast majority of them are illiterate and have been suffering from poverty, old tradition and forced marriage. XINHUA

### Afghan reporter accused of blasphemy sentenced to death

**MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan:** A court in devoutly Islamic Afghanistan has sentenced a local journalist to death for blasphemy, an official and family members said Wednesday.

Perwiz Kambakhsh, 23, was arrested on October 27 for allegedly distributing material he downloaded from the Internet and deemed offensive to Islam among fellow students at northern Balkh University.

"Based on the crimes Perwiz Kambakhsh committed, the primary court yesterday sentenced him to the most serious punishment which is the death penalty," Balkh province Deputy Attorney General Hafizullah Khaliqyar told Agence France-Presse.

An official notice of the penalty by the Balkh primary court Tuesday to the reporter's family, his brother and fellow journalist Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim said.

Khaliqyar had threatened Monday to arrest journalists who "support" Kambakhsh at a media briefing where officials defended the arrest of the reporter.

"Journalists are supporting Kambakhsh. I will arrest any journalist trying to support him after this," he said.

Khaliqyar had earlier said Kambakhsh had "confessed" and must be punished.

Ignoring threats, journalists were gathering outside Ibrahim's house to organize a "possi-

ble" protest, an Agence France-Presse correspondent said.

Ibrahim said the trial was held behind closed doors and without any lawyer defending him.

Global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders appealed to Afghan President Hamid Karzai to intervene.

"We are deeply shocked by this trial, carried out in haste and without any concern for the law or for free expression, which is protected by the constitution," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Kambakhsh did not do anything to justify his being detained or being given this sentence. We appeal to President Hamid Karzai to intervene before it is too late."

The group said Kambakhsh was supposedly arrested because of a controversial article commenting on verses in the Koran about women, although it has now been established that he was not the article's author.

Kambakhsh was a reporter for the newspaper *Jahan-e Nau* (The New World) and a journalism student at the Balkh university.

Conservative religious clerics have also called for the death penalty for Kambakhsh. His arrest has been condemned by domestic and international rights groups.

He has the right to appeal to higher courts. AFP



■ Burqa-clad Afghan women walk on a cold winter's day in Kabul on Thursday. The Afghanistan government launched two bodies to strengthen women's rights. AFP PHOTO