

# **THE PROSPECTS OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PHILIPPINES**

A Paper Prepared for the AMI General Assembly and Conference

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September 9-14, 2012

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is widely accepted that peace is the precondition of sustainable development. When there is peace, there is order. When there is order, there is security. When there is security, there is progress. Development comes when the issues of peace and order in the country are properly addressed and secured.

The Philippines is one of the developing countries that are longing for genuine peace and sustainable development. But peace and development in the country will remain elusive unless the internal and external conflicts are properly addressed and finally resolved.

Currently, the Philippines is conducting peace dialogues with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the National People's Army-Communist Party in the Philippines-National Democratic Front (CPP-NDF-NPA) to finally end the more than three decades of hostilities and to finally achieve lasting peace and development. Likewise, the Philippines is continually in communication with the Chinese government to ease the latest tension in the Spratly Islands and to come up with a more viable solution for the resolution of the conflict in the South China Sea.

With the election of the new President Benigno "Noy" Aquino III, the prospects of the Filipino people for the realization of genuine peace and sustainable development in the country has given new hope. His vision for a government that is founded in a "Matuwid na Daan" (Right Path) won the support of the masses and finally brought him to Malacañang to serve as the 15<sup>th</sup> President of the country.

Aquino's vision for "Matuwid na daan" served as foundation of the reforms that he started to impose in the government. His determination to correct malpractices in government agencies led to the filing of graft and corruption cases and election frauds to several high ranking officials of the previous administration. This resulted to the arrest of the former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and the impeachment of Chief Justice Renato Corona of the Supreme Court of the Philippines.

The apparent political will of the Aquino administration to impose good governance coupled with the willpower to resolve the root causes of conflict has regained the confidence of the business sectors here and abroad to invest in the country. This gradually boosts the lagging economy of the country that resulted to more infrastructure projects which ultimately redound to additional job opportunities and better social services. And due to the good economic performance of the country for the past few years, the Philippines was able to withstand the world crises which crippled many big economies in the West and in Europe.

These good indicators of growth and development must continue to finally gain the progress that the Filipino people are dreaming of. And this road to progress will advance if the internal and external conflicts in the country are finally resolved.

## **ADDRESSING THE INTERNAL CONFLICT**

President Benigno C. Aquino III commitment and support in the facilitation of the on-going peace processes is clearly expressed in his third State of the Nation Address delivered on July 23, 2012. He said that, *“With regard to the peace process: talks have been very open; both sides have shown trust and faith in one another. There may be times when the process can get a little complicated, but these are merely signs that we are steadily moving closer to our shared goal – Peace.”* He conveyed optimism on the prospects of the on-going negotiations between the Government of the Philippines (GRP) and the two revolutionary groups namely, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the National Democratic Front in the Philippines (NDFP), stressing peace in the country will soon be achieved.

With the directive of the president, in August 7, 2012, the GRP and the MILF panels met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for the 30<sup>th</sup> formal exploratory talks. Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Teresita Quintos Deles stated that the government is remained firm in its resolve to find a just and peaceful settlement to the conflict. She also pointed out that the GRP panel is prepared and committed to tackle and seek solutions to the hard issues which will surely arise in the difficult stage of negotiations, determined never to lose sight of the big picture, which is the peace and development the Filipino people have long desired. Likewise, MILF Chief Negotiator Mohagher Iqbal also expressed his party’s commitment to settling the problems confronting the peace table.

Similarly, the GRP for talks with NDFP agreed to meet their counterpart informally to tackle the issues and concerns that have caused an impasse in the peace negotiations since February 2011. The GRP panel led by Alexander A. Padilla went to Oslo, Norway last June 2012 to meet with the leadership of the NDFP on the invitation of the Royal Norwegian Government in an attempt to revive the lagging peace process. And in the press release posted on June 17, 2012, Padilla stated that after such a long impasse marked by distrust and misunderstanding, the meeting was a welcome development, an opportunity for a new beginning. They look forward to more meaningful discussions with the hope that it will lead to productive formal talks.

## **The Role of Religious Sectors in Peace-building**

The participation of third-party in peace negotiations is very important. It can play the role of “friends of the process” whereby they can facilitate, catalyse, mediate or arbitrate, if not merely observe the process or witness accords that are reached. They can also help formulate talking points to deal with a number of issues critical to the progress of the peace process, as well as propose deadlock-breaking mechanisms that

can act as safety nets if irreconcilable positions bring about dead-ends during the negotiations.

Rev. Liberato Bautista expressed that a peace process when set in motion with the greatest participation by the citizenry through their organized efforts can help achieve not only pieces of a desired peace but the totality of what approximates a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace. The sustained participation of citizens can provide resources capable of generating ideas and support necessary to see a process through.

Likewise, former Senator Wigberto Tanada acknowledged the significant role of the religious sectors in attaining peace in the country. He pointed out that peace will only come about with the involvement and sustained participation of the religious groups. He stressed that the advocacy and support of the churches for these concerns must go beyond the lifetime of this administration. He challenged the church-people and to make the timeless message of peace relevant here and now, in this time and hour, to make a difference. He concluded that the people of the church can make things happen, can bring about the kind of peace He Who is Father of all so desire for His children and the people He so loves.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) brings together Catholic Bishops from Mindanao, Mindanao members of the Ulama League of the Philippines, and Mindanao Protestant Bishops/Pastors of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines to support the peace process in the southern part of the country.

Bishops and Ulama have been holding dialogues on a quarterly basis, on areas of common concern to promote a culture of peace since 1996. Members of the BUC also initiated and supported regional dialogue fora in key cities and areas to address local issues of peace and order and inter-cultural solidarity. These include religious leaders of the Indigenous Peoples (Lumad). They also join forces with peace centers, schools, and Non-Governmental Organizations in conducting community-based culture of peace workshops and introducing peace education in the school curriculum. All of these activities are geared towards the promotion of mutual understanding, peace and reconciliation among warring parties in Mindanao.

Likewise, the Catholic Bishops Conference in the Philippines (CBCP) and NCCP are force to reckon in terms of mediation between the GRP and NDFP. They have made remarkable contribution to the on-going peace talks. They did not only help push the two negotiating panels to resume the peace talks, for example through press releases and petitions, but also worked as an intermediary during the exploration of the formal talks. They were very active in linking with non-governmental organizations both local and abroad to assist in exploring the possibilities of bringing the warring parties together to seek peace in the country. They served as a channel of communication of both negotiating parties. They created relief missions to help the victims of war in different parts of the archipelago. And they offered their offices and expertise to both panels.

## **The AFP Internal Peace and Security Plan Bayanihan**

The Aquino government national security thrusts evolve in the following areas of concerns: governance, delivery of basic services, economic reconstruction and sustainable development, and security sector reform. In support to these security agenda of the president, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) initiated the Internal Peace and Security Plan or popularly known today as the AFP IPSP Bayanihan.

In the past, the AFP has bravely addressed the national threats through various military operations. The AFP admitted that while they succeeded in diminishing the capacity of the rebel groups, armed internal security threats continue to this day. They AFP acknowledged the fact that the insurgency is largely driven by structural problems in Philippine society, such as unequal development, non-delivery of basic services, injustice, and poor governance – all of which are beyond the military's purview. In this regard, the AFP recognized that addressing the insurgency problem is something that cannot be done by the military alone.

In the light of the above observations and in support to the security agenda of the Aquino government, the AFP initiated a paradigm shift in confronting the insurgency problems to finally bring about lasting peace and progress in the country. Thus, AFP IPSP Bayanihan was created with the purpose of winning the peace through People-Centered Approach.

According to the AFP IPSP Bayanihan, this project is adhering to the primacy of the peace process and supporting peace building activities such as reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict-affected areas. It focuses in securing and bringing peace and development to conflict-affected communities. And it contributes in sustaining community development initiatives through the construction of basic social infrastructure.

This AFP project has won international admiration. The United States Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy (IMTD) whose mission is to promote a systems approach to peace-building has recognized the AFP where stronger platforms in the areas of human rights, community-based focus and people-centered approach were established on its campaign to fulfil a lasting peace in the country.

For the realization of this new campaign, all the major services of the AFP, different government agencies, people's organizations, and the community must get involved.

In the part of the AFP Chaplain's Service, the IPSP Bayanihan can be implemented through its programs on Religious and Moral Education, and Social and Cultural Leadership. AFP Chaplains are well positioned to serve as agents for the proper implementation of the IPSP Bayanihan for the realization of genuine peace and sustainable development in the country. Chaplains are rooted in military camps and have direct access with the people of the community. Their daily contact with the soldiers and the community people and their reputation for integrity in most settings could be utilized to spread the good intention of the IPSP Bayanihan. This can be done

through the religious and moral education and social and cultural leadership programs of the chaplain service.

The supports and cooperation of both the soldiers and the civilians will be easily solicited when they understood clearly the good essence and beneficial goal of the IPSP Bayanihan in their lives through education, social and cultural activities.

## **ADDRESSING THE SPRATLY ISLANDS ISSUES**

The Spratly Islands are situated in the South China Sea, one of the largest continental shelves in the world, which is believed to have abundant resources such as oil, natural gas, minerals, seafood and is home to shipping lanes that are vital to global trade.

China claims sovereignty over nearly all of the Spratly but the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei claims part only of the sea. About forty-five (45) islands are occupied by a relatively small numbers of military forces from China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Though China and Taiwan based their claims to the Spratly on their historical records dating back to the Sung Dynasty (A.D 960), it was not until 1946 that Taiwan took possession of the Itu Aba Island - the largest Spratly Island, and 1951 that China claimed the Spratlys. In 1968, the Philippines occupied three (3) islands, while in 1973 Vietnam possessed five (5) islands, which were disregarded by China in 1974. In 1978, the Philippines claimed more isles and named them "Freedom land" or "Kalayaan." It was not until 1979 that Malaysia first started to make a claim for the islands. More significantly, in 1988, the hot tension occurred when China and Vietnam became military engaged over Johnson reef in the Spratlys. In 1995, moreover, the skirmish between China and the Philippines happened over the Mischief Reef.

The Philippines's claim over parts of the Spratly Islands is derive from the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea, which grants the country the sole exploitation rights over the natural resources within the Exclusive Economic Zone which extends to 200 nautical miles around the coastal state and, more relevant to fossil fuel extraction, to continental shelf defined as the "natural prolongation of the land mass" up to the same 200 nautical mile limit. One example is the Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal which sits about 230 kilometres (140 miles) from the Philippines' main island of Luzon while the nearest major Chinese landmass is 1,200 kilometres northwest of the shoal, according to the maps. Hence, the shoal is well within the Philippines 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone.

The disputes in the Spratly Islands are not only the concerns of the above claimant countries but also by the international community. It is the seaway passed everyday by many ships trading across the region and continent. Hence, conflict in the South China Sea really affects both regional and international stability. In fact, a known professor on Peace and Conflict Resolutions even predicts that the disputes in the Spratly Islands might ignite the Third World War if the tensions continue to rise and the issues of conflict are not properly resolve. Thus, the participation of the international

community in the search for appropriate solutions to the Spratly Islands conflict is important for at least two reasons: ensuring both regional and international security and peace, and promoting regional cooperation.

### **Latest Skirmishes in the Spratly Islands**

One of the most disturbing issues these days is the rise of tensions around the Spratly Islands. Most recently, there have been intrusions by Chinese aircraft into Philippine airspace on May 23, 2012, Chinese patrol boats in the Recto (Reed) Bank only eighty-five (85) miles west of Palawan on March 2, 2012, and, most serious, a Chinese missile frigate's firing at Filipino fishing boats near Palawan's Quirino atoll on February 25, 2012.

Lately, a hard-line Chinese army general has called for decisive action against the Philippines. People's Liberation Army General Lou Yuan said China has not abandoned the idea of war at all costs to protect its interests.

As the tensions between the Philippines and China remained unstable, the Chinese government, through its government-controlled media, told its citizens that they should refrain from visiting the Philippines. Thus, the Chinese travel agencies announced they had suspended tours to the Philippines, under government orders.

### **Positive Scenarios for Peace and Development**

There is no better way of resolving international conflict than diplomatic dialogues and cooperation between warring countries.

In spite of the rising tensions in the Spratly Islands, the countries involved in the disputes have expressed their desires to settle the issue peacefully. The aspirations for peace and development in the South China Sea was strongly affirmed in the Joint Communiqué following the Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States last January 2012 on President Obama invitation, thus: "The two sides agreed to enhance communication and coordination in the Asia-Pacific region in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation, and to work together with other Asia-Pacific countries, including through multilateral institutions, to promote peace, stability, and prosperity." Again, President Jintao declared his commitment for peace in the region before world leaders at the Boao Forum for Asia on April 15, 2012 by declaring that "China will always be a good neighbor, good friend, and good partner of other Asian countries."

Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario stated that China and the Philippines need to take steps to bolster their relationship as they have agreed last year despite territorial conflicts in the South China Sea or now known as West Philippine Sea in the country. Del Rosario reminded his counterpart Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi during their meeting in August 2012 that when President Benigno Aquino III visited China last year, both their governments committed to bring their diplomatic relations to a blossom while separately taking steps to resolve territorial rifts in the West Philippine Sea.

In their meeting, they both decided the need to undertake initiatives that would restore the relations between the two countries. And as part of confidence-building measure, Del Rosario renewed his invitation to Yang to visit Manila to allow them to discuss “the challenges in greater detail and how they will be addressing them.”

According to the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), President Benigno Aquino III and Chinese President Hu Jintao will likely discuss a territorial row on the sidelines of a regional trade summit in Russia this September 2012. DFA stated that Aquino will reaffirm in the talks the Philippines’ claims to parts of the South China Sea while seeking to ease tensions with China and boost trade.

Due to these efforts of the two governments to ease the issues that causing frictions between them, the tension in the Spratly Islands, particularly between the Philippines and China, started to deescalate. We hope that this decreasing tension over the disputed islands will continue to subside. We pray that the two countries, together with other claimants of the Spratlys, will renew their commitment to adhere on their previously signed ASEAN agreement on the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.” The Parties agreed to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities in the South China Sea that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner. Likewise, we implore that their declaration of peace signed in September 2003 to promote the development of the resources in the disputed islands be pursued.

Furthermore, the countries involved in the Spratly Islands dispute should revive their agreement for possible joint exploration for petroleum in the South China Sea. It is widely known that in March 2005, the national oil companies of China, the Philippines, and Vietnam signed a joint accord to conduct marine seismic experiments in the Spratly Islands for economic purposes.

Suggested confidence-building measures among claimant countries include joint research and development in the Spratlys. Among the suggestions to enhance the development of the Spratly Islands include the creation of a marine park; establishment of a South China Sea Institute for Marine Resources Management, conducting a joint survey and assessment of the mineral and hydrocarbon potential and implementation of maritime safety and surveillance measures.

If these agreements are observed properly by the countries involved over the Spratly Islands dispute the prospects for peace and development in the region, which surely benefits the claimants and the international community, will likely prosper.

## **CONCLUSION**

Certainly, in a war there is no winner. All parties involved are losers. The cost of war is glaringly painful. Many lives have been maimed and wounded. Personal dreams

and aspirations have been shattered. Families and communities have been broken. Thousands of people have become refugees in their own land. Hopes for the future are dimmed because of this war. The hopes for economic recovery are even dimmer. Beyond these concrete realities, we note with great alarm the emergence of a “culture of violence” where more and more of the people begin to think that war is normal to their lives, and the use of the instruments of violence is the only possible source of their security.

What is clear is that thousands of innocent people continue to suffer violence, displacement and poverty because of these conflicts.

The active participation of all stakeholders of peace-making in the country, together with the support of the international community as neutral hosts for peace negotiations, the warring parties in the country have no more reason to delay the settlement of their age long disputes. Indeed, the Filipino people have suffered enough. They are already tired of war. Displaced communities due to the protracted conflict should be given the chance to live normally and peacefully. The devastating effect of constant fighting, particularly to innocent children and women, should serve as lessons. The cost of war is high, which affects the economic situation of the country justifies the campaign to stop it. Let the Filipino masses finally enjoy their rights to live in a peaceful and progressive society.

Indeed, the hope of the Filipino people to achieve peace and development is revived with the commitment of the fresh administration led by the new President Benigno C. Aquino III to bring genuine reforms in the government and to finally resolve the protracted armed conflict in the country. His strong determination and show of political will has indeed sparked the prospects of peace and development.

With the strong support of the religious sectors to the determination of both the Government and the Revolutionary groups to find ways for the peaceful resolution of their conflicts, the road to peace and development is more lucid.

The dramatic shift of AFP Military Operations’ focus, from combat parameters to people-centered-approach, is a new dimension that will help pave the way for the establishment of a peaceful and sustainable society.

Likewise, the hope for the peaceful resolution over the disputed Spratly Islands never wavers. With the new commitment of the Chinese President Hu Jintao to enhance communication and coordination in the Asia-Pacific region in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation coupled with his declaration that China will always be a good neighbor, good friend, and good partner of other Asian countries bring renewed confidence for the furtherance of peace and development in the South China Sea.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China should continue to observe their signed “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” and the “Declaration of Peace” to control the escalation of conflict in the region. They should also revive their agreement for possible joint exploration for mineral resources in the South China Sea that would bring economic benefits to the involve countries.

Indeed, it is the hope of the Filipino people that the resumed peace negotiations in the country must continue and the agreement for the peaceful resolution of the Spratly Islands dispute will pursue so that the issues causing war can be addressed rather than fought over, the economic, social and political conditions that have bred conflict can be dealt with the people, and the dream for lasting peace and sustainable development in the country will ultimately reign over the land.

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