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Philippines

Battles for peace

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In Mindanao, our comrades of the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Mindanao (RPM-M) are engaged in peace talks with the government. They are building relations of solidarity between the 'three peoples' of the island. This report was written following a recent visit to Mindanao.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party of Mindanao (RPM-M) is the section of the Fourth International in the Philippines. It is particularly well established on this southern island, the second biggest in the archipelago, having come from a regional split in the Mao-Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

Mindanao is an "economic frontier": the multinationals have their sights on its agricultural, forestry and mining wealth. In the name of antiterrorism, this is where the United States has chosen to intervene in order to justify the return of its troops to the archipelago: they have made a convenient target of the Muslim organizations.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/arroyomilitary.jpg>]

Philippines president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo salutes the military

Our comrades of the RPM-M are well established in the centre, west and southwest of the island, where there live together the "three peoples": the Moros ("Muslims"), Lumad ("indigenous peoples") and the descendants of the Christian settlers who came from other regions of the Philippines. That is also the area where the militarization of the country is most serious.

The army and the paramilitaries, under the aegis of the United States, confront the units of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Lumad self-defence forces and the communist guerrillas. The RPM-M is intervening at the heart of a zone of conflict, where the question of war and peace is permanently posed.

Philippine society is welcoming and Filipinos are kind people. But the relations of power can be extremely violent. In some places, the very Christian son of a landowner can assassinate a peasant leader, emasculate him and then feed his brains to the pigs. But you will still find in his hacienda a reproduction of the grotto of Lourdes!

To go from the town of Iligan to Cotabato City is to take a curious tourist route. Military checkpoints are omnipresent. As we go round a bend in the road, my guide, a clandestine comrade of the RPM-M, tells me that the head of an administrative department died here, victim of an ambush. Everyone suspects his deputy, who had designs on his job. Further on the tree trunks are riddled with bullet marks: there was a fierce battle between the army and the troops of the MILF.

On the outskirts of an urban area an Irish priest was killed while resisting a gang of kidnappers. In the town, a bus shelter also has traces of bullets: drug traffickers and soldiers had a shoot-out here. Armed violence is present in all its forms.

Peace negotiations

The RPM-M is engaged in peace negotiations with the government. But the negotiations are bogged down. In 2002, one of the camps of the Revolutionary People's Army (RPA) was even bombed and occupied by the army. There is

not agreement on the content of the negotiations.

The RPM-M demands that the protection of the environment be dealt with. The government refuses. This question concerns the rights of the Lumad: their entire cultural and social life is bound up with the forests. But in the region of Upi, forestry and mining companies, as well as agro-industry, are encroaching on their ancestral domains.

The RPM-M cannot accept that the rights of indigenous peoples are ignored by the negotiators. To deal with the situation, it organized a conference in mid-May with representatives of non-governmental and popular organizations. It explained what was at stake in the negotiations, the reasons why they were blocked, and called for people to mobilize.

The fact is that for the RPM-M, the negotiations cannot be reduced to a closed discussion between politico-military organizations, governments and general staffs. The population, which is directly concerned, must put forward its demands. It is, for example, out of the question to decide in the place of the Lumad what would be the conditions of an acceptable peace in their ancestral territories.

This approach does not only concern the negotiations that have been engaged in by the RPM-M. Our comrades are deeply involved in the organization of a broad, united front peace movement in the whole island. This involves in particular building a consensus between communities on the right of self-determination for the Moros.

The negotiations between the MILF and Manila are entering into a very political phase. Banners hung across the streets of Cotabato City called on the population, in the name of the Central Committee of the MILF, to take part in a massive rally at the end of May to show their support for the armed organization. Other banners denounced the US presence.

Solidarities

One of the risks at present is that the negotiations between the government and the MILF will not take into account the existence within the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) of Lumad communities. The Philippine regime is applying the old doctrine of "divide and rule".

Our comrades, on the contrary, are constantly seeking to build solidarities, to put forward proposals that are capable of responding simultaneously to the rights of the "three peoples" of the island. This objective structures their entire intervention. Wherever possible, the mass organizations must include members of the various communities.

To bring aid to victims of military conflicts or of natural disasters, Christians will be sent to the Moros and Moros to the Lumad. Work among women in the Muslim communities is difficult, but the Moros who join the RPM-M must have assimilated this dimension (in addition, a large part of the political work of our comrades is led by women members).

As a mark of solidarity, young people from all over the island will soon be taking part, in the region of Upi, in a summer camp (inspired by the European experience, in which Filipinos regularly participate).

We come here to one of the most interesting features of the activity of the RPM-M: how to build, in a zone of armed conflicts, links of solidarity between different communities, in order to avoid a situation where the rights of each of them would be expressed independently of the others, so that the popular struggles converge instead of being in

competition with each other.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/pierre1.jpg>]