

The Philippines: Peace Zones in a War Region



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For thirty years, the government troops and the “Moro Islamic Liberation Front” have been fighting on Mindanao, the southernmost of the three largest Philippine islands. The war has taken 60,000 lives and driven a million people from their homes. The enemies have been invited to the negotiation table. These days the chances for a settlement are better than ever, thanks in part to courageous civilians like Father Bert. He has mobilized villages to participate in his “peace zones” project. He encourages villages to declare themselves as “Peace Zones.” Forty have already signed on, exerting constant pressure on both the rebels and the government to find a political solution to the conflict.



“Bombing in Liguasan, several dead, refugees. “ The SMS came from one of sixty rice farmers, who Father Bert has equipped with cell phones. They send SMS alerts when the truce is broken in one of their villages in central Mindanao. A text message costs one peso, around one cent – a price even a farmer can afford. Father Bert forwards the messages to the presidential peace adviser in Manila, to the Peace Network that unites 400 NGOs, and to his “Ceasefire Watch.” Its five-member team patrols villages, swamps, and rice fields night and day in a minivan, reporting the numbers of dead, injured, and displaced after every attack.



Father Bert prefers the weapon he likes to think is strongest: words. He drives through an idyllic landscape of rice paddies. The stalks of rice sway in the wind like a veil of green silk. What seems like paradise does have a few shortcomings. "Over there was an ambush with two dead," he says before a curve, "and that's where a hundred-kilo bomb landed, to judge by the crater." The priest has experience with bombs.



To cut the army off from its reserves, the rebels took over a bridge on the Narciso Ramos Road, the only route through central Mindanao. Villagers in nearby Nalapa'an were caught between two fronts. Father Bert broke through the lines in his jeep, screaming at the officer who tried to stop him, and negotiated with both the rebels and the army. Only a few hours after the civilians had made their way to safety on the monastery grounds, the first 105mm grenades started hitting Nalapa'an.



Father Bert's monastery had become a refugee camp. An outbreak of measles killed 80 children. Or was it 120? At some point he stopped counting. No international observers are keeping statistics as in Afghanistan or Iraq. Mindanao is a forgotten war. Whoever invades a village, whether government soldier or rebel guerrilla, claims he is there to protect the population. "If that's what you want, just leave them alone!" demanded Father Bert Layson. He obtained an assurance of security for Nalapa'an from both sides. They did not want to make any further commitments for the time being.



“Now Entering the Nalapa’an Peace Zone” reads a sign, somewhat dented by an errant moped. The Peace Zone is vulnerable. It lacks armed protection. From the outside, it looks like any other village on Mindanao. The huts made of bast mats and palm leaves stand on stilts, scattered among banana trees and coconut palms. There is no electricity or running water, and no way to tell whether a hut might belong to a Christian or to a Muslim.



Nalapa'an's uniqueness lies in the details. Children play catch on a new basketball court. Their games used to include pretending to be "refugees" in tents. Now, Christian children talk to Muslim children and vice versa. Their parents help each other in the fields, the Muslims with the Christians' corn crop, the Christians with the rice harvest of the Muslims. For every 12 sacks, the helper receives one as a reward.



In the battles that raged in 2001 and 2003, Nalapa'an was not destroyed like in previous years. The war moved westward. The island of peace attracted charitable organizations bringing goats, seed, and plows, laying water mains, and building houses and roads. Even the German Caritas took part in the reconstruction. With so much support going towards Nalapa'an, the government did not want to appear indifferent and so it repaved the main street. Other communities became envious because they, too, wanted to be in the Peace Zone.



In the afternoon, the Ceasefire Watch that Father Bert had sent out by SMS returns. Halfway into the Liguasan swamp, they had received information that rebels and government troops were facing each other across the market square in a village 20 miles away. Tanks had driven into position, a helicopter was circling, and a soldier lay dead on the ground. The skirmish began as a feud between a Christian and a Muslim family. Both called on relatives within the army and rebel forces. They were all happy to oblige with reinforcements.



“We stopped the escalation at the last minute!” exults Baba Butz, the leader of the Ceasefire Watch. His eyes are shining, like a kid playing cowboys and Indians. Actually he wasn’t the one who called off the battle – it was the “Joint Army and Islamic Militia Committee,” which is also supposed to monitor the truce. But Baba Butz and his team were there. “The Committee only takes its work seriously if we’re there,” he says. Father Bert later adds: “Baba Butz has gradually realized that his work supports the whole peace process in the Philippines and not only the peace zone.”



Baba Butz is a jovial man with large, soft eyes. But when he thinks no one is watching, his smile disappears, his lips narrow, and his gaze turns blank. The life he led before he met Father Bert, as commander of a 1,300-man rebel troop, left scars. Like most Muslim rebels on Mindanao, he began life as a farmer. Since he occasionally worked for the provincial election commission, he was better off than most. He lived in harmony with his Christian neighbors. They brought him part of their Christmas dinner, and he shared his delicacies from the end of Ramadan.



But the dictator Marcos considered Mindanao the “promised land,” initiating a pogrom of the Christian settlement. Paramilitary vigilantes known as the “Ilaga” saw to it that the Christians received enough land. At the beginning of the 20th century, Mindanao was almost exclusively Muslim. Today, they make up only 20 percent of the population. The Ilaga murdered Baba Butz’s uncle and burned down the local mosque while dozens were inside praying. Baba Butz quit his government job and joined the rebels. The civil war on Mindanao came, then as now, in waves. In the interludes of peace, Baba Butz returned to farming. His “home” was a ruined village where Christians and Muslims no longer spoke to each other.



He was evacuated on 14 occasions, often for months at a time. Father Bert led the last reconstruction of his village. Baba Butz could hardly believe that a Christian would assist Christians and Muslims alike. "He's good at heart," Baba Butz says. "All human beings are basically good," says Father Bert. This is perhaps Father Bert's most important motto. Perhaps someday Baba Butz's relatives will come to understand him. For now, his work in the Ceasefire Watch has him labeled a collaborator.



The next day, the Watch again tried to get through the Liguasan swamp, again with the Joint Committee. Baba Butz wore a gray, misshapen vest with the words "Cease-fire Watch" embroidered in red. His pants were rolled up. The army sent Colonel Dolortino, who carried a satellite telephone tucked into his belt. He wore brown leather slippers and a yellow polo shirt. He resembled the rebels' delegate. He is the son of a sultan and a member of the MILF central committee. Both speak much louder than Baba Butz. Even a camera crew from Philippine television was there.



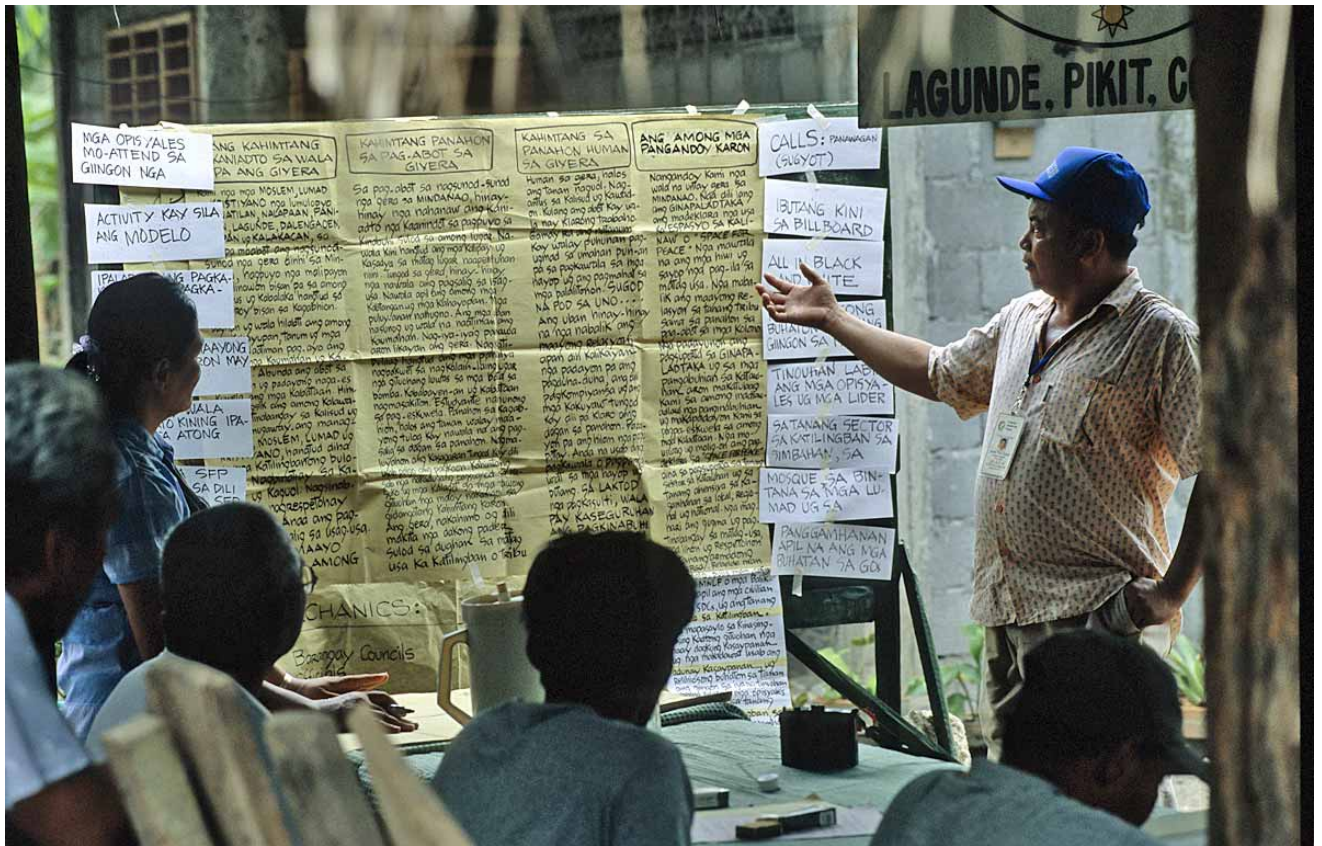
At the edge of the swamp, they reached the dock of a fishing village. Men gathered around the delegation. They wanted to know why the army attacked settlements in the swamp. Baba Butz found out that 280 families fled from this village – a good bit more than the 46 families as the army claims. And he was informed that a civilian was injured. He tried to convince the officer and the sultan's son that she must be examined by a doctor.



"Kidnapper Gang Bombed, 17 Dead" was the morning newspaper's headline. They are said to have taken hostages to their hideout in the swamp: Chinese engineers, an Italian priest, and businessmen from Manila. But no one actually knows whether the "Pentagon" gang is a rebel unit. Will there be retaliation and escalation, as there was a year ago?



Father Bert often discusses the Peace Zones with the colonel. Just last week, at a seminar at the University of Manila, they shared a hotel room, despite having some differences of opinion. Although the colonel is actually quite a polite person, he said, "I refuse to accept a Peace Zone that government troops can't enter armed. Kidnappers like the Pentagon Gang could use them to hide." That complicates the debate, since it was the prohibition on weapons, for both soldiers and rebels, that originally defined the Peace Zone. The first Peace Zone in 1988 protected Naga City, in a lovely mountain region. Here the Communist "New People's Army" had fought against the government.



In Naga City, the council of elders was strong enough to enforce the no-weapons rule among young men of fighting age. Today the city of 100,000 is a prosperous destination for tourists from Manila. Further communities followed, ultimately bringing the count to 40. But not every city had a council of elders like in Naga City. According to a study by the Gaston Ortigas Peace Institute in Manila, the success of a Peace Zone depends largely on whether institutions like the elders and the church actively support it.



The method that Father Bert has used is the Peace Zone. He believes that Colonel Dolorfino is on the right path. A year ago, when the Peace Zone was founded, there were very few men in the evacuation camps. After a few weeks, the colonel asked Father Bert: "There are more men than before. Does that mean they all used to fight for the MILF?" Father Bert didn't lie – he said yes. "This is a Peace Zone," replied the colonel. "As long as the men are with their families, we'll leave them alone. We can fight somewhere else."



Around five in the evening, the monastery fills with life. Baba Butz comes back with the Ceasefire Watch and goes into Father Bert's room to pray. Two employees count the collections from the morning services. At the same moment, 1,700 miles east from them, representatives of the MILF and the government face each other across a negotiating table in Malaysia, addressing details like land reform for the first time in the history of the peace process.



In Manila, the day is drawing to a close. Father Bert gets a SMS from the presidential adviser, Teresita Quinto-Deles: "Congratulations, Father, on the actions of the Ceasefire Watch!" An employee of the Swedish Red Cross and also from the World Bank have announced a visit for the next morning. The World Bank representative is interested in seeing the "postwar society" on Mindanao. Father Bert shrugs his shoulders. The optimism of the World Bank exceeds even his own. "Postwar? They must know something we don't."