

Collateral Damage from, and Casualties of, Failed Arroyo Policies - MabuhayRadio

Written by Amina Rasul

Tuesday, 16 September 2008 01:49 -

I flew to Davao City on Monday to meet with 19 representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) from Sulu, TawiTawi, Basilan, Lanao Sur and Lanao Norte, Zamboanga, Cotabato, Davao and Maguindanao. Local partners of development and aid agencies, these CSOs are immersed in community work on peace advocacy, interfaith dialogues, human rights, electoral reform, and development projects, among others. In the 70s, they would have been known as "peaceniks."

The 2-day consultations were quickly organized by the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society Organizations to make sense of the unraveling of the peace in Mindanao. We were all caught flat-footed by the speed of the downward spiral to violence. Before the Supreme Court's TRO of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), all of our CSOs were busy with advocacy and development work, confident in the knowledge that the work we were doing helped to strengthen peace and democracy in our communities. Over the past weeks, we have witnessed the resurgence of fear of "the other" in our communities. We have grappled with the surge in displaced people: half a million, per last week's estimate of the National Disaster Coordinating Committee (NDCC). We mourned the killings of over 60 in the fighting between government troops and the MILF.

That night, several received text messages that a family with four children in Datu Piang, Maguindanao, were killed when their banka was bombed by the military. All of us scrambled to confirm the message. The next day, the news was confirmed. A family in a banka, attempted to escape the fighting in their barangays by crossing the Bugok River. They succeeded in a permanent escape from a harsh life. Pregnant Aida Mandi and her four siblings were killed. The shrapnel lacerated bodies of Aida, 10-year-old Bailyn, 7-year-old Zukarudin, 5-year-old Adtayan, and 2-year-old Faida were recovered by relatives. The bodies of their father, Daya Manunggal and another son have not been found.

The military first denied then later confirmed the killings, stating arrogantly that they would shoot if shot at. How the military could mistake a banka filled with children for armed enemies at 10 in the morning is a mystery. As Mindanao Archbishop Orlando Quevedo said, "There is a time for denials, a time for explanations, and a time for admitting mistakes. Clearly, this is a

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time for admitting mistakes".

In Laguna, also on September 8, another family died tragically. Janeth Ponce, unable to feed her family, forced her three children to drink liquid toilet bowl cleaner and took it herself afterwards. Her children were Marjorie, age 4; Margareth, age 3; and MJ, age 2. It seems her husband, a construction worker in Manila, had not sent their monthly allowance of P800. My God. My children spend that much on pizza for one dinner! I cannot imagine the crushing misery and hopelessness Janeth must have felt in order to end the lives of her children. Even when my own family lost all we had when Jolo was bombed by the military in 1972, we never felt absolute hopelessness. Our coping mechanism was our extended family, who supported us until my parents got back on their feet. Janeth had no one to turn to.

If we must put a face to the casualties of Mrs. Arroyo's failures, then it would be the Manunggal family of Maguindanao and the Ponce family of Laguna. Residing in ARMM, the poorest of the poor region, the Manunggals refused to give up, clinging to life, escaping the war that had made their baranggay hell. Their lives were forcibly taken from them. In contrast, Janeth Ponce, living in the more affluent Laguna province, gave up on life and took her children with her.

Mrs. Arroyo, the economist and sporadic champion of peace, has much to account for. Janeth Ponce is the face that will be superimposed on the rosy economic picture painted for us. Her family's tragic death exposes the truth behind the administration's boasts of economic success. Success for the haves, but not for a third of our population who fall below the poverty line. The Manunggals will be the veiled picture we get a fleeting view of, hidden behind the Arroyo administration's portrayal of full support for peace and the security of the state. The Manunggals are mere collateral damage of the government's successful war against those infernal MILF commanders who threaten the security of the state. If the military say that they saw—at 10 in the morning—the MILF using this family as their shield, they can't possibly be

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lying. The military are our protectors! The liars are the eyewitnesses who testified that the family and several others were indeed crossing Bugok to escape. After all, these Moros are protecting those rebels.

And so, dear readers, let us all mourn the death of Janeth and her children. The Manunggals?

Sorry na lang

, collateral damage? # # #

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