The Bishops – Ulama Conference in the Philippines: Building Peace through Interreligious Dialogue

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The Bishops-Ulama Conference (earlier called a Forum) was formed in November 1996 in the Philippines. It brings together religious leaders of Muslim and Christian communities from all over Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. It includes bishops of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, members of the Ulama League of the Philippines, and bishops of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.

At present, the BUC's convenors, representing the three religious groupings are Archbishop Fernando Capalla, past Chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Inter-religious Dialogue; Dr. Salipada Tamayo, representing the ULP; and Bishop Hilario Gomez, Jr., of the NCCP.

From its inception, the BUC has focused on the spiritual bases for peace from both Muslim and Christian religious traditions, grounded in the belief in one God, a common origin and a common destiny for all. Even as the government and warring groups pursue a “genuine, comprehensive, and lasting peace” through political treaties and socio-economic development, the bishops and ulama focus on “the missing component in many failed peace efforts – an affirmation of the convergent spiritual and cultural bases for peace.”

I. Dialogue meetings

Over the past fifteen years, the BUC has held 38 dialogue meetings on a quarterly or semi-annual basis in various cities in Mindanao. These inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues have been carried out in an atmosphere of openness, mutual respect, and growing familiarity among participants and their representatives. Normally the dialogues bring together 40-60 participants representing the three religious bodies. In-between the larger meetings, a Tripartite Commission composed of three to four members from each of the religious bodies meets to prepare the agenda for future gatherings.

At one time or another, the dialogue meetings have touched on two general areas. The first area covers the spiritual dimensions of dialogue – such as the bases for peace from the Bible and the Koran; the special place of Mary and Maryam in both scriptural accounts; and the goals of conflict resolution.

The second area covers current concerns arising from the ongoing peace process. These include various crisis points – such as the kidnappings of several foreign missionary priests; the killings of a Catholic bishop and three other priests in Jolo, Basilan, and Lanao del Sur; and localized incidents of violence against Muslims or Christians.

II. War and the peace process

Going beyond individual incidents, there were major events affecting the peace process – in particular, the declaration of all-out war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front by President Joseph Estrada in April-July 2000. This resulted in major dislocations of predominantly Muslim communities in central Mindanao. The atmosphere for peace talks was further clouded during the same period by the notorious kidnappings of foreign and local persons by the Abu Sayyaf, an extremist bandit group operating mostly on the chain of islands stretching from Basilan to Tawi-Tawi in the southernmost part of the Philippines. Up
to the present, elements of the Abu Sayyaf are still being pursued by the military, after they killed two of their last three hostages, an American Christian missionary and a Filipina nurse.

The most recent outbreak of violence took place in August 2008 over the abrupt cancellation of the Memo of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the government and MILF panels. Armed conflict erupted in Lanao del Norte and Central Mindanao, again displacing many Muslim and Christian communities.

It is perhaps during periods of open conflict and violence that the Bishops-Ulama Conference has played its key role – by providing a neutral forum where joint statements against violence have had a moderating effect. The BUC has also stressed that the conflict cannot be viewed as a religious war; that acts of extremist groups like the Abu Sayyaf are “un-Islamic;” and that both Muslim and Christian communities can help bring about a culture of peace.

### III. Peace advocates

Since 1999, the Bishops-Ulama Conference has sponsored a yearly Mindanao Week of Peace – starting on the last Thursday of November and ending on the first Wednesday of December. For Christians, this covers the first Sunday of Advent, a special season of prayer. For Muslims, this may also coincide with the Holy season of Ramadhan. The week of peace has been able to generate widespread support among the youth. Christians and Muslims alike, as well as various sectors in different communities throughout Mindanao. It has confirmed the conviction that the vast majority of Mindanaoans are for peace.

Listed below are the various themes selected each year for the Mindanao Week of Peace:

- **1999** - Healing the Past, Building the Future
- **2000** - Mindanaoans Together Towards a Culture of Peace
- **2001** - Peace: Sharing the Vision of Hope and Unity
- **2002** - Peace Through Reconciliation:
  Mindanaoans Seeking a Common Ground
- **2003** - Healing Through Forgiveness: Key to Total Human Development
- **2004** - A Reconciled Family, Agent of Reconciliation
- **2005** - Millennium Development Goals:
  Women and Children as Partners in Peace Building
- **2006** - In the Name of the Almighty, God of Harmony, Care for the Earth
- **2007** - Building Bridges of Peace with our Peace Officers
- **2008** - Integrity of Heart and Mind, Way to Reconciliation and Peace
- **2009** - Think Mindanao, Feel Mindanao, Bring Peace to Mindanao
- **2010** - Responsive and Responsible Governance: Key to Peace, Development and Sustainability
- **2011** - Common Word Between Us and You:
  Love God and Love Your Neighbor

In addition to the Mindanao-wide dialogues, bishops and ulama have also engaged in subregional inter-faith meetings – in the cities of Zamboanga, Cotabato, Davao, Marawi, Pagadian, etc. In these localized gatherings, religious leaders – including pastors, priests, and imams, as well as leaders of the indigenous people communities – are able to address local issues more readily.

Recognizing the value of inter-religious dialogue and the crucial role of religious leaders in situations of conflict, the Philippine government has provided logistical support to the BUC
through the Office of the Presidential Assistant for the Peace Process. The BUC also receives support from other donor groups and from various sectors including the academe and media. In this regard, the BUC works together with many other peace centers and peace advocates in Mindanao.

Lately, in December 2010, the BUC Tripartite Commission has agreed to the restructuring of the BUC to include non-Mindanaoans and to establish BUC chapters in Luzon and the Visayas. There are also preparations for a second Asian Bishops-Ulama Conference to be held in Indonesia next year. The first conference was held in Manila in August 2003 and was attended by Muslim and Christian delegates from 19 countries. Among its main resolutions was to extend the network of the Bishops-Ulama Conference to other Asian countries.

In January 2010, a BUC delegation comprising bishops, ulama, and government officials was invited by the Pakistani government to share the BUC experience with their counterparts in Islamabad. The context for interreligious dialogue here was reversed with a majority Muslim population aspiring to reach out to minority religious and ethnic communities.

IV. Prospects

Despite the ups and downs of a protracted peace process, the Bishops-Ulama Conference has been able to send a steadfast message to all – whether peace doves or war hawks – that the major Christian and Muslim leaders of Mindanao are for peace.

Gradually, wider circles of dialogue at the lower levels are being formed – e.g., among parish priests, imams, and pastors. Culture of peace workshops have also been conducted among grassroots communities.

Several bishops and ulama in their own localities have been active in monitoring ceasefire agreements and promoting the peace process. There are also suggestions for BUC participants to be more proactively involved in development efforts, principally by facilitating consultations among local communities.

From a global perspective, the series of dialogues and joint activities among Muslim ulama and Christian bishops in Mindanao may be unprecedented anywhere else in the world. This ongoing experience affirms that instead of being sources of conflict, authentic religious traditions can be harnessed as solid foundations for peace.