

A Moro homeland

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FINISH them off, or give them back their land. Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile may have uttered this sentiment in exasperation over the Arroyo government's lack of a clear policy on Mindanao. But he should know Mindanao, having played a key role in the Marcos regime's handling of its problems. He also has business interests in the place. What does he really have in mind?

He cannot possibly seriously think that a total war against the Moro rebels can succeed. Thirty-one years have passed since the Marcos military burned down Jolo, but the resentments generated by that single atrocity continue to simmer to this day. As the recent events in Sulu have shown, there is no way the military can hunt down and kill remnants of the notorious Abu Sayyaf group without hurting other members of the communities in which they seek refuge. Most of these rebels are not full-time fighters. It is not easy to tell a rebel from an ordinary resident. The possession of firearms is not a distinguishing mark of a rebel because nearly every male adult in this place owns one.

Moreover, names like "Misuari Breakaway Group," "Jemaah Islamiyah" and "al-Qaeda," are labels used by outsiders like the Philippine military and US agents. Just because the government and foreign forces use them to identify the enemy does not mean that these terms of affiliation have any meaning for the local people. The "enemy" that the government is pursuing, whether Abu Sayyaf or MNLF-Misuari loyalist, is a human being with a proper name. He belongs to a family and a kin group. He is a member of a community; he goes to a mosque and prays among other members of his faith. You cannot kill this enemy, especially one who fights in the name of his people, without making enemies of the rest of his relatives and community.

As important, the Moro people-the Muslims, the Lumad, and, indeed, Christians who identify with the aspirations of a Bangsa Moro homeland-may be a minority both in relation to the total Mindanao population and the Philippine population. They may be concentrated in four or five Muslim-dominated provinces in Mindanao. But the reality is that they are also now everywhere in the country.

The war and its insidious cousin-land-grabbing-have forced them out of their homeland. Now they are in Metro Manila, in Baguio, in Central Luzon, and, practically, in every major urban center of the archipelago. They sell pearls, pirated DVDs, and smuggled goods. Forced by circumstances unique to displaced people, they inhabit the lower rungs of the informal economy. Their assimilation into the mainstream is skin-deep; they remain a separate people, steeled by their faith, and bound together by a shared dream to regain their homeland.

That they are currently uprooted from their homeland does not mean they have stopped being Moros. The man who sells DVDs in Quiapo or pearls in Greenhills may be far from the war, but he is not psychologically distant from its horror. It is naive to think that he no longer cares what happens in Panamao, Patikul, or Parang. He may not himself plant a bomb in a bus full of innocent people to express his outrage; but maybe, whether he knows it or not, he is sheltering someone who would. Anyone who thinks it is possible to confine the hostilities to the remote villages of Sulu and win a decisive victory there, without provoking retaliation elsewhere, betrays a cockeyed view of the world.

The new American vocabulary of global anti-terrorism is a paradigm of such a stilted view of reality. It may give us what seems like an informed way of looking at world events, but it will not shield us from the horrific consequences it creates or makes possible. When a bomb is dropped on a community in Sulu, we call it a military operation. But when a bomb is exploded in Metro Manila, we call it a terrorist attack. That is not the way a Moro militant would view it. Both events, to him, are integral aspects of the same war.

And yet, by calling these isolated attacks on civilian targets the handiwork of the Jemaah Islamiyah or of elements linked to the al-Qaida, we draw attention away from their basic local roots. We confer upon them a global conspiratorial character they do not possess. I do not condone terrorism of any kind. But this semantic arrogance not only blinds us to the real sufferings of people at the receiving end of state aggression, it also induces in us a moral smugness that justifies simplistic solutions to human problems.

But we have earned a minor place in the US-led war on terrorism-a role that compels us to give up a part of our rights as a nation in exchange for military and economic assistance. We have brought American forces right into the door of the Mindanao conflict, in total violation of the letter and spirit of the 1987 Constitution.

The Mindanao conflict is complex enough as it is without having to locate it in the American world map of global terrorism. Its roots go back to the unsuccessful wars of pacification under the Spanish and American colonial regimes. The new Philippine Republic rode on the inertia of these colonial expeditions. It spread its rule, its settlers and carpetbaggers, all over Mindanao, completely ignoring the ancestral domains of the native peoples and the sovereign rights of the sultanates that had administered these territories since pre-colonial times.

Land is what the Moros lost, and a homeland is what they hope to recover. Everything else-Misuari, Salamat, the MNLF, the MILF, the Abu Sayyaf-is but a footnote in a just struggle that will never be resolved by war.

P.S.

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