

■ By RENATO MABUNGA

A MIDST THE perennial problems of corruption, poverty, and the soaring prices of fuel and basic commodities, the bloody rebellion in the south has rendered Mindanaoans more devastated than ever. The aborted signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), exacerbated the unresolved conflict in the Moro South. Today, it is battling a nightmare as it pursues a dream of peace.

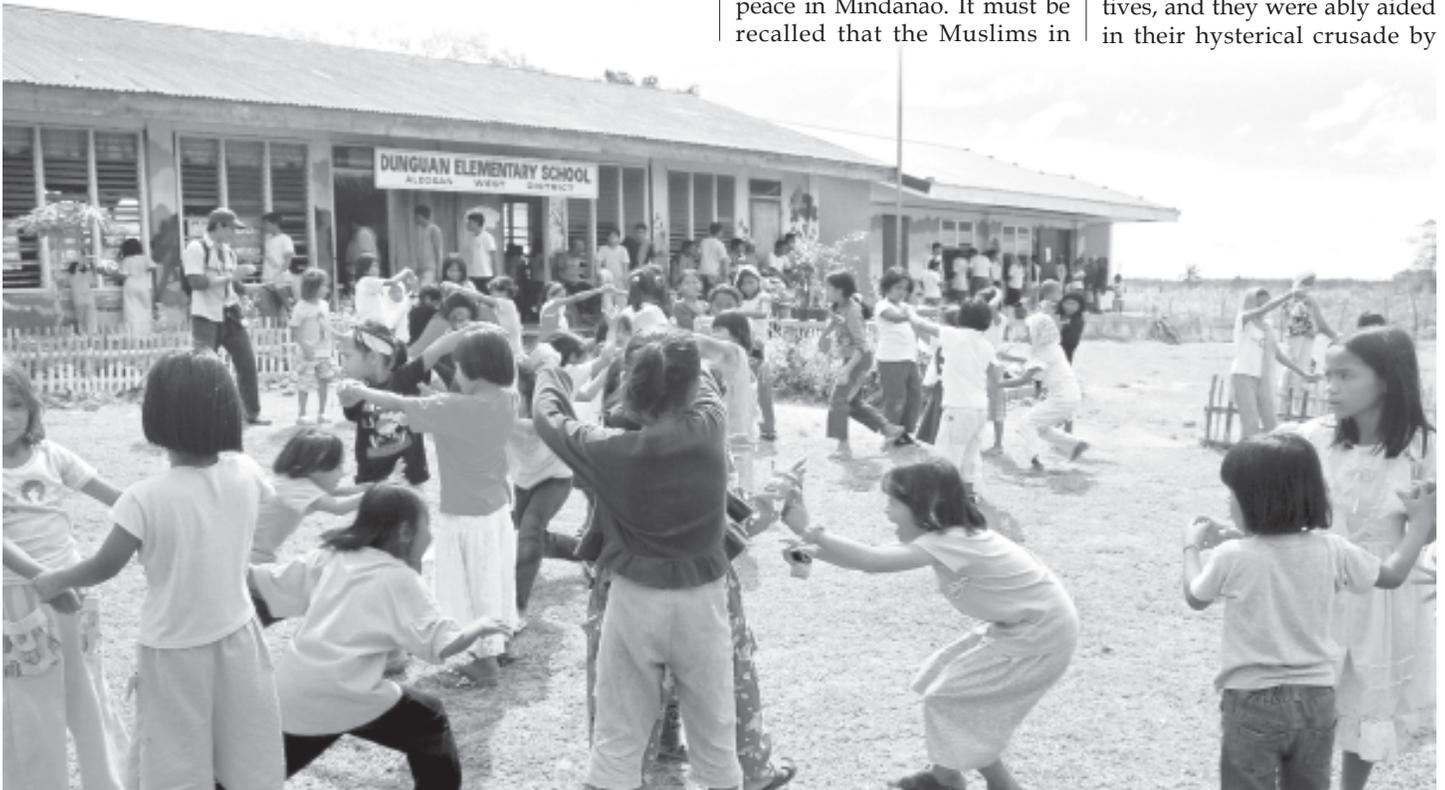
Recovering lost ground **THE MOA-AD AND THE SEARCH FOR PEACE IN MINDANAO**



The MOA-AD is a product of an 11 year-negotiation between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). To a lot of sectors, the MOA pointed to the possibility of peace in Mindanao. It must be recalled that the Muslims in

Mindanao started to wage a struggle for self-determination in 1968 with the birthing of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Negotiations then with the MNLF resulted in the signing of accords, including the Tripoli Agreement, and later the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). But a rift within the leadership of MNLF in September 1996 paved the way for the establishment of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which claims to be the true representative of the Bangsamoro people. A year later, negotiations between this new formation and the GRP started, leading to the crafting of a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain scheduled for signing on August 5, 2008.

On the eve of its signing, the Supreme Court of the Philippines (SC) issued an injunction against it. The Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) said that the MOA was devoid of consultation with the communities and villages that will be affected. Fierce opposition to the memorandum came from local executives, and they were ably aided in their hysterical crusade by



Respite from the horrors of war: Moro children play during a Children's Fun Day in the school grounds of Dunguan, Aleosan, N. Cotabato, December 2007.

Manila-based politicians. The lack of cogent information on the details of the MOA only stoked the fears of a lot of people, that some even campaigned for the arming of civilians to defend themselves against the Muslims. This only resurrected the seeming animosity between the Moros and the Christians, and was aggravated further with the revival of the dreaded anti-Moro "Ilaga gang," infamous during the Marcos period.

On October 14, 2008, The Supreme Court declared with finality that the memorandum was "contrary to law and the constitution." Immediately, the peace panel was disbanded. This was a fatal blow to the 11-year search for solutions to the conflict in Mindanao.

The outcry surrounding the MOA-AD was followed by a new round of skirmishes in Mindanao. Disgruntled commanders of the MILF, headed by Ameril Umbra Kato, Abdullah Macapaar alias Bravo, and Aleem Sulaiman Pangalian, attacked villages in the provinces of Lanao and Cotabato and some communities in SOCKSARGEN areas. As of October 2008, more than 640,000 civilians had been displaced, hundreds were killed and thousands were left injured in nine provinces of Mindanao.

In the latest fact-finding mission organized by SALAM-Task Force Civilian Protection (TFCP), Mindanao Peoples Peace Movement (MPPM), Alyansa ng Mamamayan para sa Kapa-yapaan (AMKP) and the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) in the affected villages in Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Maguindanao and North Cotabato, cases of gross violations of human rights were recorded. These were allegedly committed by both the state and non-state parties. There were nine (9) documented cases of enforced disappearance and eight (8) cases of torture. Hundreds were also wounded and injured. Millions worth of property were destroyed through arson, looting and indiscriminate



No Boundaries: Christian and Moro children during a Fun Day in Aleosan, N. Cotabato.

Photos by TRACY PABICO



firing, and there were reports of bombings that affected the civilian populace. There were 101 documented cases of arbitrary execution and death related to the on-going war, fifteen (15) of which were children aged 3 months to 17 months old who died of acute diarrhea, severe dehydration and severe malnutrition in evacuation camps.

The issue of death in the evacuation centers calls attention to the limitations of the ongoing relief efforts provided to the victims. According to Duyog-Mindanao, a solidarity movement for the tri-people in Mindanao, "while relief efforts are very much stymied, government is downplaying the issue

of a humanitarian crisis and a full scale war against the MILF is inevitable."

At the heart of the Mindanao issue is the debate on people's right to self-determination, which the MOA bravely tackled. It is another story though when the rights of other peoples in Mindanao, who historically have ancestral domain claims to lands that were included in the document, are not taken into consideration.

But what is crucial now is the immediate cessation of hostilities that have wreaked havoc on the lives of hundreds of thousands of the civilians in the affected provinces, and the rebuilding of the trust and harmo-

nious co-existence between and among the tri-people of Mindanao - the first casualty in the MOA hullabaloo.

Yet, even as peace efforts should be accelerated, there is also the colossal task of educating the public - who have largely been apathetic to the problems in the south - on the root causes of war in Mindanao.

State institutions should also give urgent attention to the massive displacement of communities and other gross violations of human rights. The peace negotiations should resume, to hammer out a comprehensive and peaceful solution to a problem that has festered for decades. But such negotiations should also be conducted with transparency and ensure that the voice of all those affected is heard.

That full-blown animosities between the various groups have not erupted only signals that there is still space for groups and movements who choose the path for peace in Mindanao. If all those who still believe in it will only unite, stand their ground, recover lost ground and do their share, peace will surely come. ■

The author is the Secretary-General of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA).