

Reconciliation as transformation: Continuing Journey for Transformation, A Quest for Justice

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Gawis ay agew! A pleasant day to all. I am Piya Macliing Malayao, a Bontok from the Mt. Province in the Cordillera Region, in Northern Philippines. I am the secretary general of KATRIBU, a national alliance of indigenous peoples in the Philippines comprised of more than 500 local indigenous peoples organizations, and we are a mission partner organization of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines for its program and important role for the indigenous peoples.

Before I continue, I want us to remember and celebrate the great victories of the indigenous peoples throughout the world. Let us also honor our ancestors, heroes and martyrs who stood up for our collective rights and for the dignified lives of the future generations. Finally, let us salute our sisters and brothers, as well as our staunch advocates, for continuing the journey and struggle. From the stories that we have heard for the past days, the journey was never easy, it was painful, challenging at the very least, to change a situation or system that has promoted colonization, oppression, and marginalization of indigenous peoples.

(The situation that we are in)

Let me acknowledge here my colleague, a fellow youth; a lumad, which is the collective term for indigenous peoples in Mindanao; and a sister in the struggle for justice and for the recognition of our collective rights to ancestral land and self-determination, Michelle Campos. She is a Manobo from the province of Surigao del Sur in the Caraga Region, Mindanao in Southern Philippines

I would want to share more about Michelle and their community to be able to convey the situation of the indigenous peoples in the Philippines, and indeed in many other countries as well.

Michelle is a strong young woman. She is a graduate of the TRIFPSS (Tribal Filipino Program in Surigao del Sur) for her elementary, and the ALCADDEV (Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development) for high school. Both are indigenous peoples schools, and they are initiated and developed by their own community and MAPASU, their local organization. These schools provide education to at least 26 indigenous communities in Surigao del Sur and adjacent provinces in Eastern Mindanao.

She is a daughter of the MAPASU Chariman Dionel, a grandchild of the community leader Datu Bello, and a student of ALCADDEV's Executive Director Sir Emok. All of them were all brutally killed in front of their community on September 1, 2015 by the Magahat paramilitary group, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Indeed, a traumatic experience not just for her siblings, aged 12, 8 and 5, who witnessed the killing, but to the entire community and indigenous peoples movement whose leaders were silenced by gun.

After the killing on September 1, along with the burning of their elementary school and community cooperative store, Michelle's community fled their land and homes. There were more than 3000 of them, who walked about 8 hours down from their community to the town center

and drove for 5 hours to Tandag City. Sadly, up to now, more than 9 months after, more than 2000 lumad remain in the evacuation center in Tandag City.

Aside from Michelle's community, there are around 700 lumad who also remain to be in a sanctuary compound of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines in Davao City. They have been there for more than a year now. They left their homes as a form of protest as well as to divert from the military operations in their communities, encampment of their homes and schools, and different forms of human rights violations they receive from the military and paramilitary forces.

For the past 6 years, we have monitored at least 54 cases of forced evacuation affecting around 20,000 indigenous peoples, at least 90 cases of indigenous leaders, women, youth and even children killed, and more than 100 indigenous leaders and organizers have been filed with trumped up charges. Despite massive condemnation, even from the international community, none of the perpetrators has been put into jail even with the issuance of warrants of arrest, and the people, the victims and their families are like prisoners of uncertainty and continuing threat.

What is behind these attacks against indigenous communities, schools, and people? Government policies and economic priorities, which are often against the interest of the indigenous peoples. On the other hand, we are seen as threat by the government and corporations – our being organized as communities who have experienced decades of oppression and marginalization, and our active defense of our ancestral lands against government's so-called development projects in partnership with big corporations, of mining, dams, energy, and plantations, among others.

Michelle's region is known to be the mining capital of the Philippines where more than 20 mining operations are currently ongoing. Their community is where the coal exploration and operation of the Abacus Mining is to be found. Like other new energy projects in the Philippines, they are encroaching ancestral lands without the community's decision.

These attacks are also an affront to our right to self-determination as indigenous peoples. Our schools, and community learning centers also embody our assertion for our right to self-determination. Our children are being taught of our culture, indigenous laws, values and wisdom, our language, songs, music, dances, arts, sports, and continuously development of our livelihood and health. All of these are on top of the regular academic subjects. In these schools, and in our organizations, the lumad children are taught of their rights, and to take care of, develop and defend our lands and communities.

(Reconciliation and Transformation)

These happened, and are continuing to happen after reconciliation processes in the Philippines, in 1997 where a law on indigenous peoples rights was enacted, in 2010 when a truth commission was announced by the government, and in 2012 when a human rights super body was formed.

We have heard and felt the pain of other communities and nations from different global regions. There are differences, but also a lot of commonalities – history of colonization, discrimination, taking away of our lands and resources, pushing us to inhumane conditions, and taking away our dignity as people. But on the other hand, we have our determination and movement to keep, or revive, the unity of our people to change the situation we are in.

Reconciliation is about resolving the roots of the conflict and not about the continuing assimilation of minoritized groups or repression of the struggles or resistance of the indigenous communities. It is about revoking laws and policies, or even transforming the institution or system that has created or supported discrimination and oppression, and not just about the absence of violence. It is about having the political will, especially for those who are in power, to do concrete actions to implement the agreements, treaties, or declarations that were brought about by the concerted actions and vigilance of the people. The act of silence of those who have voice or power is a continuation of the oppression.

Reconciliation should be about granting indemnification and attaining justice for the oppressed and all the victims of human rights violation, historical negligence of the government, and the institutionalized discrimination.

(Our Continuing Journey, A Challenge)

Reflecting on our achievements and victories, and honoring our ancestors and those who have gone ahead of us, gives us endless inspiration and added strength to continue our journey, not just as separate communities or nations as we are facing a global and systemic oppression and marginalization. What should we do?

- 1.) We should be diligent students of our society, and continue to educate ourselves, the youth and future generation of our history and current situation.
- 2.) Build and strengthen our organizations and networks, from the local up to the international levels. Such global ecumenical indigenous peoples' network that we have is a good example. These are venues to share our joys and pain, and a venue to make our voice louder, especially when we are being silenced in the locality not just by bullets.

It is very important not to limit our connection and unity among the indigenous peoples, but also with other oppressed people, advocates, opinion makers, allies, etc. and build solidarity groups and social movements. These formations should collectively work for the protection and promotion of life, and its sacredness

- 3.) In all forms and fronts, guided by our indigenous spirituality and learning from the experiences and golden lessons of our ancestors, we should continue to assert for our collective rights; push for the implementation of declarations, agreements, treaties towards resolving the core issues we are facing. Let us remain resilient and vigilant, and collectively work towards attaining justice.

This is a continuing challenge to us all. As conveyed by one of the songs in our community that I would also want to share with you, as we are one big community:

“the youth, mothers, fathers, and grand parents, be courageous, stand up, and fight.”

Tummured, bumangon, lumaban ta'y ungun-a, ya datako'y, ya datako'y am-a da, ya allapo da'y wada

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