



Voices *from the South*

HIGHLIGHTING VOICES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH WHO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOMINANT PARADIGMS OF POWER, DISTRIBUTION, AND DEVELOPMENT.

In the mid-1980s, during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, a group of Bishops representing various denominations across the Philippines formed the Ecumenical Bishops Forum (EBF): a gathering of religious leaders who were willing to speak out against the countless human rights abuses occurring under the oppressive regime. 28 years later, the EBF still stands firm against systems of power and oppression - serving as advocates for the poor, deprived, oppressed, and marginalized in the Philippines today.

In this month's "Voices from the South," Karibu speaks with Bishop Solito K. Toquero, co-chair of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum. Bishop Toquero reflects on the current human rights situation in the country, the state of the peace process in the Philippines, the recent peace framework signed by the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the growing American military presence in the region.



Bishop Solito K. Toquero at the EBF National Assembly, Oct. 2012 Palawan, the Philippines

Safeguarding human rights, life, and dignity; ending the culture of impunity

Interview with Bishop Solito K. Toquero, EBF Co-Chair

Karibu: *The Ecumenical Bishops Forum (EBF) is a rather unique model, with bishops from many different denominations across the Philippines becoming members on a personal basis and actively fighting for human rights in the region. Can you tell us a little more of what the aims and goals of the EBF are?*

Bp. Toquero: The purpose and goal of EBF is to make visible the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ through individual bishops of the various Christian denominations, Roman Catholic and Protestant. We meet in fellowship, study,

and action, by discerning the signs of the times, speaking with one voice in defense of human life, human rights, and human dignity.

In addition, we cooperate and work together for a just and lasting peace by advocating for the ending of the culture of impunity prevailing in the Philippines today.

What are the main challenges related to human rights facing the people of the Philippines today?

The main challenges related to human rights facing the Filipino people today are the extra-judicial killings and disappearances of people labeled

as leftists, activists, critics of the government, or members of media. These are people that expose the graft and corruptions of government officials, and they often include church workers and lay people working with the poor and marginalized.

Another challenge is the stalled peace-talks between the Philippine Government (GPH) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Some of the NDFP negotiators and advisers in the peace talks have been arrested by the police and the military, and have been charged with criminal offense. They are languishing in jail when they are supposed to have safe passage in order to sit with the negotiating panel.

THE ECUMENICAL BISHOPS FORUM (EBF)

IS A FELLOWSHIP OF BISHOPS FROM VARIOUS CHURCHES IN THE PHILIPPINES WHO ARE UNITED BY ITS COMMON DESIRE TO SERVE THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IN ITS PARTICULAR CONTEXT. INSPIRED BY PROPHET MICAH AS WRITTEN IN CHAPTER 6:8 (“WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU BUT TO DO JUSTICE, AND TO LOVE KINDNESS, AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD”), THE BISHOPS REMAIN COMMITTED TO BE FAITHFUL SHEPHERDS OF HIS FLOCK AS THEY FACE THE CHALLENGES OF THEIR SITUATION.



Still another challenge is related to the destructive mining activities of local and transnational corporations. These systems not only destroy the forests and damage the eco-system, they displace the local inhabitants (mostly indigenous people and farmers) which results in violent dispersals.

Political leaders, who are favoring the rich and foreign corporations at the expense of the poor and marginalized, contribute to the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. This is notwithstanding the continuing graft and corruption in government agencies and institutions.

The theme of this year's national EBF assembly is "to safeguard human rights, life, and dignity; end the culture of impunity" (Oct 16-18, 2012). How is this done by the EBF in practical terms?

Our goal is to ensure that the rights of the most marginalized are respected. We do this by seeking a dialogue with the police officials and the military, and also sending representatives to the United Nations. We also issue concrete statements condemning the violations of human rights which often reach the office of the President and are printed in major newspapers.

On top of this, we ally with NGOs and other institutions - local and international - such as the NCCP, CCA, and the WCC in order to mobilize for joint advocacy.

We also conduct regional seminars in various regions in the Philippines to reach out to the grassroots in dialogue; not only with bishops, but other local church leaders, lay people, young men and women, and local government officials. The themes relate to human rights, environmental concerns, peace and justice, and sustainable development.

Finally, we send representatives to the U.S. sub-committee on foreign relations to ensure that US military aid is not being used by the Philippine military to violate human rights.

Related to your last point, the U.S. has recently announced that they will expand military presence in the Asia Pacific region. How does the EBF networks responding to this?

“Any peace accord must benefit the larger sector of society -- the poor people... If not, then peace without justice is actually *unpeace*.”

BISHOP SOLITO TOQUERO, EBF

EBF members, in coordination and cooperation with other like-minded groups, are conducting seminars and consultations with various sectors of society, especially the students and young people, on the consequences of letting a U.S. military presence return.

Foreign soldiers in the past have records of raping Filipino women, but are never put in jail. There is a record of innocent civilians being killed, yet the offending soldiers are never punished by Philippine courts and are instead repatriated to the U.S.

Our thoughts are that U.S. presence is here for their own self-interest, and not to protect us from China as is often

expressed. Besides, the Philippines would become more vulnerable from possible attacks from enemies of the U.S. if we let them build a new military base here.

In the last few week, the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed a framework for peace on the southern island of Mindanao. Do you have any thoughts or reflections on this?

While the EBF did not have any direct involvement in the peace framework, the inter-faith group composed of Christian bishops and Muslim ulamas there have had several conferences on the peace situation in Mindanao. They say that there is a need for the GPH and MILF to consult and dialogue with the grassroots before making statements or signing a written accord of peace. They believe that true peace can only be attained in Mindanao if we consider the voice of all sectors that will be affected.

In the recent peace talks, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), another party in the conflict in Mindanao, have been left out and now are complaining. This has resulted in a split group emerging, with many deciding to continue their armed struggle for independence. This has resulted in a “wait and see” attitude within many of the affected sectors in the area.

The inter-faith groups in Mindanao believe, however, that any peace accord must benefit the larger sector of society - the poor people - in Mindanao. If not, then peace without justice is *unpeace*. EBF believes that true peace in the region can only be attained with justice.

Click here to read the statement of the 22nd National Assembly of the EBF, October 16-18 2012.