



INTERVIEW WITH MARY ANN ARNADO
Secretary-General, Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC)
April 14, 2010 – MPC Office, Davao, Philippines

While in the Philippines with IPJ Deputy Director Dee Aker and Program Officer Karla Alvarez, Editor Emiko Noma sat down with Woman PeaceMaker Mary Ann Arnado to get an update on her work and the peace process in Mindanao. The wide-ranging interview took place less than a month before presidential, legislative and local elections.

*For more information on the IPJ's work in the Philippines, see
www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/ipj/field/past_activities/Philippines.php.*

*To read about the life and work of Arnado, see
www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/ipj/programs/women_peace_makers/women_peacemakers/asia/Philippines.php.*

EN: Do any of the presidential candidates have a peace platform or an articulated agenda regarding Mindanao?

MA: Not really. We have been trying to bring them to Mindanao and engage them on this particular issue, but we did not get a very good turnout. In fact, only one confirmed: the only woman who is running for president. All the rest did not confirm. The objective of that particular forum with the “presidentiables” was to elicit from them they’re own platform for peace in Mindanao, especially since it seems the last nine years of the GMA [Gloria Macapagal Arroyo] administration will not likely deliver a political settlement of the armed conflict. Of course there are some gains there, but ultimately in terms of resolving the root causes of the armed conflict and coming up with a peace formula, it looks like it will not be achieved in this administration. We are looking now to the next president on this.

So among the nine candidates, it’s only Erap [Joseph Estrada] who has a clear policy, which is actually about war. And the others are not very clear. For example, [Benigno] “Noynoy” Aquino, is just saying that he’ll continue the talks, the process should be more participatory, it should involve this and that, but there is no clear policy yet. I think he’s trying to keep it safe because if he goes this way or that way it will definitely hurt his campaign.

Noynoy Aquino for me is more open and has more integrity as a person. But the party that he comes from, the Liberal Party, and the people around him came out very, very strongly against the MOA-AD [Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain] in 2008.¹ So these are things that do

¹ The MOA-AD was initialed by both the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, but the official signing was blocked after local politicians in Mindanao requested a temporary restraining order in August 2008. The armed

not look very promising insofar as the presidentiables are concerned. Manuel Villar is also not committal about Mindanao. The candidates are just carping on their anti-poverty campaign and that's it – nothing concrete.



Arnado (right) talks with Noma and Aker in Davao

EN: As the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) get closer to a Comprehensive Compact, is there a way to neutralize the spoilers that came out at the last minute with the MOA-AD?

MA: I think it's very important at this point to prepare for a situation which might lead us again to the 2008 problem. For us here on the ground, we are looking at the Local Government Units who are very strong in their campaign

against the peace process. That is why now – in fact tomorrow – we are going to have a provincial forum with the candidates in Cotabato province.² This is a meeting among Moro and Indigenous Peoples wherein they will get to present their peace platforms that they would like the candidates to take into consideration in their campaign and in their future programs if they win the election.

There are several issues that we have raised, for instance the ancestral domain issue of both Bangsamoro and Indigenous Peoples. We would like the candidates to have a definitive stand, a clear position on how they are going to address this. The second is on the protection of civilians, because this is very important, especially in Cotabato province which is one of the hot spots of conflict. The other one is about the peace process itself: How shall the local leaders contribute to ensure that this will succeed. The other one is war and displacement in the area, which up to now is still a continuing problem. And the other one will be more on development projects that are coming into the ancestral domain areas, for example, at the Pulangi River they are planning to set up a hydroelectric dam. It will submerge many communities there.

At this stage the candidates are eager to talk and listen and maybe give some commitments, because they are also asking for votes. We think this is the time to take this up with them. We are starting with Cotabato, then Maguindanao, and there are others. We go to the provincial level, not just on the national level – because these are also the likely spoilers.

We will also follow up these commitments when they sit as congressmen or governors in the area. So far we are getting positive responses from the candidates. I hope that from there it will be the start of an engagement of the local politicians who are also incidentally the spoilers of the peace process.

groups returned to fighting, displacing hundreds of thousands civilians. The Supreme Court ruled the document unconstitutional in October 2008.

² See “Peoples’ agenda outlines peace, respect for ancestral domain in North Cotabato” on the Web site of MPC: <http://mindanaopeoplescaucus.org/home/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=40>.

EN: Obviously the collapse of the MOA-AD was quite a setback, but since then have you seen some new windows of opportunity opening up?

MA: You know what surprised me was that if you talk to people now, there are more and more who are now open to the MOA-AD. Before it was really painted like a witch: You need not see it, you need not read it, you need not understand it. That's what was projected. So everybody was just very afraid, very critical, very angry about this. But in the end when they started to read, review, discuss, exchange on the MOA-AD, more and more people started to open themselves to the document itself. So I think it's really just a matter of educating our communities, informing them – and this should be done on a massive scale. Even the peace groups are open to the MOA-AD, whereas before there were only two or three who stood up for it. But now they are open.

EN: How will that play into the Supreme Court ruling it unconstitutional?

MA: It is unconstitutional, and so there is some homework there that should be done so that it will pass the test of constitutionality. For example, the process of negotiation or the process of consultation – it has to be fulfilled to ensure everybody gets on board. That's the basis why it was declared unconstitutional.

The second is that it was interpreted as some kind of assurance that the president will initiate some steps to be able to change the constitution. That is perceived as an encroachment into the powers of the legislative body. There are some suggestions already on how to rephrase that so that we are able to do away with the constitutional violations there.



Schoolchildren demonstrate for the MOA-AD during Mindanao Peace Power Day in March 2009.

But there are also others who are looking at this on a much broader sense, really saying, why don't we change our constitution? There are many saying the constitution cannot stay forever, and the only block to a constitutional change is really GMA. There are many groups that think there are things that we should change there, but they are afraid of the political agenda of the administration. So if we move to the next president, people might be open there.

For instance, one of our legal luminaries is saying, "Why don't we put a surgical amendment into the constitution – something which is purposive, to allow the Bangsamoro people to recognize their own state?" The formula they are looking at is more on the state and sub-state relationship, a federal system. This can be explored.

But I think we need to have a clear political strategy at the national level, and then among the civil society we also educate, we prepare the ground, we inform them what's happening. At the same time, we also pressure or influence the Local Government Units. After the MOA-AD, there are more and more internationals who are coming to help us. So in terms of international support, we're there. They have done the groundwork for that. But what we are missing is the national campaign that will develop a critical mass of support. Plus, how do we also work on the spoilers. So as of now, we are doing that in this election.

EN: When we heard about Bantay Ceasefire being invited to the International Monitoring Team [IMT], it seemed like a huge victory for civil society.³ But the other day you described how it came about, that it was somewhat in reaction to the proposed women’s framework on civilian protection⁴ and not something you were necessarily seeking out. Do you see the invitation and involvement as a success?

MA: Well, for me, if you look at it in terms of engagement, participation, recognition of our efforts, and the opportunity to be able to directly engage those who are having the control over combatants, the ones inflicting the violence against civilians – if you look at it that way, that’s a very big victory, especially for MPC who is really grassroots. And then having us get invited in this international body which has member states, that is a big accomplishment on our part. It elevated our status. That’s the broader picture.

“... if you look at it in terms of engagement, participation, recognition of our efforts, and the opportunity to be able to directly engage those who are having the control over combatants ... that’s a very big victory, especially for MPC who is really grassroots.”

But there are many concerns. There are so many questions that we need to address about the implication of this particular decision, organizationally. We are looking, for example, at a possible identity crisis, an organizational crisis. Is it really MPC who will be there? What if this particular mechanism does not work? Will it affect our credibility at the ground level? The people on the ground may say, “They are there and it’s not working, so maybe they have been co-opted in that process.”

The head of the peace panel, during their briefing about the CPC [Civilian Protection Component] members, told our chairman and two other representatives that given this new responsibility, MPC should go slow in its advocacy work. He is aware that we are very vocal about certain issues that we see at the ground level – we can be very noisy in the media. So he said that given this new responsibility, MPC should reconsider its advocacy work and maybe go slow.

EN: This was the head of the government peace panel?

MA: Yes, Ambassador Rafael Seguis. So that also was another worrying signal for me. We told him that MPC is not just doing protection work. We are not ready to close our office just to be part of

³ Bantay Ceasefire, meaning “Ceasefire Watch,” is a program of the MPC. It is an independent, community-based ceasefire monitoring team. The story of its beginnings can be found in the narrative of Arnado’s life and work, available at: <http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/documents/ipi/WPMNarratives/MaryAnnArnado.pdf>. Because of the work of Bantay Ceasefire, the MPC was invited by the International Monitoring Team to be part of its Civilian Protection Component.

⁴ A framework crafted by Mindanaoan women on how to protect civilians, particularly the internally displaced. It was presented to both peace panels. The document is available at: http://mindanaopeoplescaucus.org/home/modules.php?name=Women_Framework

the CPC, which might not even work. So we said that what we will do is assign people, accredit people who will be the CPC members. And these people will be detailed to the CPC and they will be doing CPC work on a full-time basis. They will be kind of on leave from MPC. So that is our initial plan in order to insulate the MPC from the perception that we are only there and part of that mechanism.

We will still maintain the Bantay Ceasefire because the Bantay Ceasefire is primarily doing the security aspect, ceasefire mechanism work, and then we have already launched this *Sagip Sibilyan*,⁵ which is also about humanitarian protection. But we will have people who will be assigned as CPC. And during that period when they are CPC, they will not be Bantay Ceasefire – just to distinguish that from the ground. We have done the rounds of meetings, consultation, updates on this among our volunteers, because they are also confused. So now I think it's becoming clear.



We have also developed Terms of Reference. They're taking shape now. We will have people migrate to CPC, and MPC will continue with its usual work. For instance, there is some expectation in the IMT that I will be the one doing that work for CPC. And I told them already that I cannot do that because I have other priority work within the MPC. But that was their expectation initially – even that of the MILF. In fact some of them wanted me to be the coordinator for the CPC work. But I told them I'm not ready for

that kind of work. We will have our people who will be there, but I will not personally do it.

They also have some practical problems where they find me effective there. Among the CPC members, they are all men in that body. It's really difficult to be working with them because, for example, in their first two or three meetings, I could already sense the power struggle among the other members who are very interested in the coordinator position. In our initial meeting, one of the groups there is interested in being coordinator. I told them, "This is IMT, this is international. As much as possible our strategy is for the internationals to work on this – you're here, you have the resources, you should be effectively using your time. We don't want MPC competing with you; that's not our intention. Because this is IMT, this is your show and MPC will continue with its ground work."

In that meeting, they were very happy that we were supportive of them. But when the other two groups came, they were also interested in being coordinator, so that started their power struggle. Even the venue of the meeting – they're quarreling about where the venue will be. Initially we had agreed that the venue would be here. And then the other one said, "Why in Davao? It should be in Cotabato because the problem is in Cotabato, the IDPs are in Cotabato, everything is in Cotabato." So they are on a stand-off even on the venue. And since they could not agree, they keep on calling me to resolve the problem for them. I said, "No, you talk it out among yourselves, because I have no problem whether it's Davao or Cotabato. So you talk it out." Eventually they decided to postpone the meeting.

⁵ Translated "Save Civilians," the program is part of Bantay Ceasefire and will be focused exclusively on protection work.

Then the other issue now is that we have prepared Terms of Reference which introduce a framework on humanitarian protection. We did all that preparation, the research, what will be our framework, what will be the guidelines, what mechanics. And we are two or three steps ahead because we already have a women's framework, which we have submitted to the peace panels. So we also asked the IMT to comment on the proposal. They said, "You know we cannot decide on this because we still have to go back to our constituents; we still have to consult." So I told them, "You are worse than the MILF and the peace panel, because even this simple document you still have to go back to your community." This is just a matter of guidelines for us to work together. Then they said, "OK, give us some time to comment on this."

When I got the comments back I was laughing because all their comments are about the coordinator: How will they be chosen, it should be on a rotational basis, it should be like this Well, these are matters of planning. This can be taken up in the planning. But in the Terms of Reference and looking at the framework, they did not touch on that.

So I can sense that already among these men in the CPC, it's really going to be just a power struggle, which, for me, that's expected looking at the very culture itself – they want to be in leadership positions. Given that, MPC is planning that when we deploy our people there, we will deploy women.

After our meeting, we also met with the IMT and the ceasefire committee of the MILF and AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines]. In that meeting when the turn of the military came, they said, "You know, frankly speaking, we can only say that we really do not know most of you. What we know, of course, is Bantay Ceasefire because we have been working with them since 2003, so we know them and we have already worked on several issues. But for your group, we don't know your group yet. So please submit the list of your people, what are their backgrounds, who are they, all of that. Because we will also give this to our field commanders, to our officers on the ground because they need to know you."

So in that meeting, of course they're dealing with the military and the IMT, I sense – this is just my observation – that the women will really matter here in this type of setting, because these people are really just out to outsmart each other, and it's not really about the problem. If it's the women who are talking, they talk about the problem and how to go there, when to go there, what to do, what are our tasks, and that's how we get things done. But this team is going to have its own dynamics. But still we are, of course, there. My role there now is just to set the systems, the mechanisms, helping them with the Terms of Reference, the guidelines – and once it takes off, it should just go.

EN: How long do you think that process is going to take?

MA: It should be between now and May, because the IMT is there already. In fact, [Mohagher] Iqbal⁶ was advising us that we write the peace panel and Malaysian facilitator so they can formally approve the Terms of Reference in a formal meeting of the peace panels. So once it's approved we can start the work on the ground.

Another concern was, for example, we find it strange that in the overall Terms of Reference of the IMT, it states there that the government will cover logistics, quarters, transportation, airfare,

⁶ Head of the MILF peace panel.

communications for the IMT members – except the CPC component. So I raised that with the IMT: “Why is it you invited us to the IMT, you wanted us to play this particular role and we work together, but in the logistics you are not going to cover us?”

And they said, “Oh, maybe that’s an oversight.” “I don’t think it’s an oversight because you put an exception there – an exception is really something deliberate. It’s not just an oversight that you missed it, because you said that all of these are covered, but then you put an exception to the CPC.”

So that is one of the limitations now. But on the other hand, we also look at it as possibly a blessing in disguise, because if we get quarters, food and all the support from them, that may affect our work – which is not likely the case because the IMT is also doing that. But you don’t know. But again that is one of the limitations for the CPC.

EN: Shifting just a little bit, I was reading an article in which the head of the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies – Abhoud Syed Lingga – said that Mindanaons need justice first and peace later. You work on many levels for peace and justice; what is your take on that comment?

MA: I don’t think that one should come first before the other. They can go together. For example, we should not stop the negotiations because we still need to punish all of the violators. We’re looking at the political problem and each one plays a certain role there: the military, the combatants, the political groups. So we need to address that and of course push the peace process.

But that doesn’t mean that we will also forgive everyone and forget what the violations are. In fact, in the Civilian Protection Component there is a mechanism to hold the combatants accountable for whatever violation. It’s actually a very smart proposal that one of our elders proposed: In the Terms of Reference, part of our role will be not just to report on the violations, but also to report back to the community how these violations were acted upon by the MILF and the government. We report to the community whether this certain person was indeed punished, how he was disciplined based on that particular report coming from the CPC. Because it cannot just be reporting and reporting, and for all we know they are not disciplining, they are not acting on the report.

“In the Terms of Reference, part of our role will be not just to report on the violations, but also to report back to the community how these violations were acted upon by the MILF and the government.”

So one need not go after the other. Both can go together. And in the case here in Mindanao, that is exactly what we are doing. There are justice issues that we can address within the current system, which we are already doing: filing cases for the IDPs, running after those who are encroaching on the ancestral domain of the indigenous peoples. All of these are coming from within the system. But there are bigger issues also that can be addressed if you actually resolve the armed conflict.

EN: You mentioned the idea of consulting with the affected communities – an issue that came up with the MOA-AD. Do you think initiatives like Konsult Mindanaw and Dialogue Mindanao⁷ have effectively engaged civil society? And are they feeding into the peace process at all?

MA: The problem there is that it is not feeding. I was involved from the beginning with Konsult Mindanaw. But at that time it was not yet Konsult. These were initial meetings with the Bishops Ulama Conference (BUC). So when this started, I approached the bishop here, Bishop [Fernando] Capalla, and offered that MPC is very much willing to support the BUC in this particular role that it assumes in the consultation process, because we think this is important. At that time, I was able to establish direct links with the bishop.

But then there were some concerns it was taking on government funds for the consultation. They asked me my take on that. I told them that I have no problem with government funds, because in the first place this is supposed to be their work. We are just helping them conduct the consultations, so if the money comes from them there is no problem; this is definitely just helping the government do these things. So that was the initial discussion.

I was able to attend two or three meetings. But then later they set up this Konsult Mindanaw, which basically, for me, the process was hijacked by the academe, who are not necessarily oriented about the peace process. They are not even aware about the issues there. They developed it into a research process, and then the output is a book. And they developed questions: What is your vision of peace? What is it that you can sacrifice for peace? There are four of them.

When they presented that methodology, I said that one of our first problems is that we need to educate the community about the real issues presented in the MOA-AD, and whether they will agree on all of these things or not. Before they can be consulted, you need to educate them because they have no knowledge about the MOA-AD. So they said that if we will educate, if we will give information, that will affect the credibility of our research and the independence of our research. So I told them, “This is not research! This is consultation to respond to the clamor for consultation in the GRP-MILF talks. Why all of a sudden has this become research?”

“This is not research! This is consultation to respond to the clamor for consultation in the GRP-MILF talks. Why all of a sudden has this become research?”

And then they conducted focus group discussions, they were very strict with the respondents, the informants. And it became a research process. As of now they have not submitted any concrete results that can really feed into the peace process. In fact, the negotiations have taken off and they

⁷ Konsult Mindanaw and Dialogue Mindanao are a series of consultations and dialogues attempting to engage the voices of those affected by the conflict into the formal peace process. Both processes were funded by the government and carried out primarily by the Bishops Ulama Conference.

have not submitted anything substantial there. What they just said is that based on their consultations, there are a lot of sectors who want the peace process to continue. You don't have to conduct a consultation for that. And then when we ask them, "What is your output here?" Their output is a book. It's really the academe taking over a process which should have been done by other sectors.

EN: Do you think Bantay Ceasefire can be a model for other conflict situations?

MA: Well, it's something that other communities can look into, study the experience, and then from there they can develop something which will be more appropriate to their context. Bantay Ceasefire represents a lot of experience, a lot of stories, so many lessons – and so it's something that can be an area of study for other peacebuilding efforts outside. But definitely each community has its own context, has its own dynamics, and so it should develop its own mechanism that will be more appropriate. But we have a lot of things to share.



Arnado with MPC and IPJ staff members in Davao

EN: Moving away from the peace process and on to more personal questions: How do your daughters tell their friends what you do? How do they explain it?

MA: You should ask them about that.

EN: Well, since they're not here, how about this: How do you explain your work to your daughters?

MA: Well, my biggest gratification was when my daughter Ihip told me she wants to be like me. And in fact she's planning to take up law when

she enters college. So for me it's really an affirmation that I have shared my work with my children and they are supportive. The only time that they asked me to stop for awhile was when the Ampatuan massacre⁸ happened, because they were really shocked and were very, very afraid because they knew I had been going to that area. But that was the only time they asked me, "No, don't go there anymore. Don't travel yet." So during that time I did not travel because I just wanted them to get some peace of mind.

But overall, Ihip is very supportive. She has her opinions about my work. I have asked her to write articles because she likes writing. She is also involved in her school paper. So I asked her, "Thip, why don't you write a story about one of our women complainants, because she has a lot of stories you might be able to write about." She also wrote an article about my award and Cory Aquino, because she was there during the awarding.⁹ So when Cory Aquino died, Ihip wrote an article about her

⁸ Also known as the Maguindanao Massacre, it refers to the ambushing and killing of 58 people in election-related violence in November 2009, in an area of Maguindanao ruled by the Ampatuan family. For more information, see the International Crisis Group's "Philippines: After the Maguindanao Massacre," Dec. 21, 2009.

⁹ Arnado received the Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. Fellowship for Professional Development in Public Service from the U.S. Embassy in Manila on Feb. 5, 2009.

experience, her first and last meeting with Cory Aquino, which was during my awarding. I'm happy that she's aware, and she grows with learning and getting to know and having friends among our Moro partners, among our Indigenous partners. She knows them like family – she calls them “Bapa,” “Datu,” “Bae,” and on.

During the awarding from World Vision,¹⁰ my daughter Isa was not interviewed; only Ihip was interviewed. So she said, “Why was I not interviewed? I am also her daughter. I also have something to say.” But Isa is also going with the flow as far as the three of us is concerned.

EN: Do you remember any of your childhood dreams?

MA: I don't have vivid memories of childhood dreams. But I think coming this far I'm happy with what I am doing. I could not imagine doing other things. In fact, last year I was also doing consultancy work with the city hall; the city mayor's office asked me to help them with their violence against women and children cases. I was reporting there every Friday. I had no problem with that because I was working there with women who are victims of violence. But I had difficulty balancing my work with MPC and then also going there – especially when I'm dealing with victims of abuse, because they need a lot of emotional support also. I worked there for maybe 18 months, and then I decided by December that I will just stop and focus, because it was really crazy as far as my schedule is concerned. So I had to stop that.

But then I also had my own law practice which I also eventually closed because I don't like to do cases anymore where I don't see any real advance with my advocacy. For instance I have a case where a mother and a daughter are quarreling over a certain property. If you're a lawyer you do these things on a day-to-day basis – these are your cases. But I don't get any inspiration or motivation to do that. There are other lawyers who can do that. There are also cases about collection, bouncing checks. These things I should have done before I entered my peace work and not the other way around. But when I go to court and I represent cases, some of the judges say, “Oh, I've read about you in the newspaper. What you are doing is good.” My peacemaking work has also taken over my profession, so I find it hard to do an independent practice.

EN: Do you sleep through the night?

MA: Of course! Soundly – unless I have coffee in the afternoon. So I usually just get coffee in the morning. I have no problem sleeping at night.

EN: This one is a little more abstract. What color is hope?

MA: Hope? Wow. I don't know – the colors here are all appropriated by the politicians. So the color of my hope is multicolored – there are so many shades of colors, so not just one. It can be a rainbow for me.

EN: One last question: Are you going to be able to get away from here for our summit in 2012?¹¹

¹⁰ Arnado received the first International Peace Prize from World Vision in May 2009.

¹¹ The Women PeaceMakers Program will hold its 10-year anniversary summit in the Fall of 2012.

“The Women PeaceMakers have become like a home for me. It’s a family.”

MA: Of course. The Women PeaceMakers have become like a home for me. It’s a family. It’s a venue where you know you are with people who are also doing similar things that you do. So I get a lot of energy being in that particular community, among peacemakers, even if we are not really physically connected but we know the kind of work each is doing in her place. I resonate with that, so I really feel the bond of sisterhood. So, of course, the summit will be a great time.