A PERSPECTIVE ON YOUTH, INTER-ETHNIC DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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Mindanao: A Perspective on Youth,
Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution
In the Southern Philippines

by

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Acknowledgment

The material in this book reflects an interdisciplinary, international approach to mutual learning and cooperation to help contribute to a new vision of peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity in the southern Philippines. We thank the many people associated with Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois; Capitol University, Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, the Philippines; the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc.; the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy, Manila; the Youth Exchange Division of the Office of Citizen Exchanges, Bureau of Educational Affairs, U.S. Department of State; various participants from the Inter-Faith Youth Core of Chicago and the Peace Learning Center of Indianapolis; the Islamic and DeKalb/Sycamore High Schools; and especially the 2004 ACCESS Philippines participants. The views presented in this book are solely those of the authors.
Dedication

This project is dedicated to the youth of Mindanao, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and the Sulu Archipelago. It is also dedicated to the peace efforts of all groups that are ongoing in Mindanao and to a brighter future for the ethnically and religiously diverse (Moro, Lumad and Christian) peoples of the southern Philippines.

Kalinaw sa Mindanao (Peace in Mindanao).
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Chapter One. The History of Conflict and Formal Peace Negotiations in the Southern Philippines

The Philippines, a country of over 7,000 islands, has a long and distinguished history of statecraft in the southern part of the archipelago. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, strong states emerged in the Sulu Archipelago (centered on the island of Jolo) and in Maguindanao (centered in present-day Cotabato in the Pulangi River Basin in Mindanao). Islamic religion and principles of governance had entered the region much earlier, however, and date to the 13th century. These states became fully-established sultanates over the course of the next several centuries, encompassing numerous ethno-linguistic groups within their trading and alliance nexus, which extended into present-day Malaysia and Indonesia. Islamic ideals and indigenous statecraft also penetrated well into the interior of Mindanao during this period, and had a major effect on the development of another Muslim federated state near Lake Lanao. The Maranao traditional political system is known as the *pat a pengampong ko ranao*, or the four federated estates—a multicentric power system (Madale 2003:41). Muslim influence from these regions, as well as from Brunei and Borneo, extended Islamization northward by the 16th century throughout the Visayan region and as far north as Manila. A unique combination of trading, raiding, and slaving fueled the international and multi-ethnic economies of the southern Philippine sultanates and transformed them into powerful polities.

In the sixteenth century, Spain’s desire to acquire a stake in the lucrative spice trade of eastern Indonesia and to establish their presence in Southeast Asia propelled them to establish a colonial state in the Philippines. The Hispanic conquest of the Philippines occurred relatively rapidly in most areas of the country, although effective colonial rule was never achieved in the southern Philippines nor in the Cordillera region of northern Luzon. Spanish colonialism was based not just on establishing effective colonial governance of the Philippines, but as in Latin America, was predicated on converting subjugated populations to Roman Catholicism. The Islamic sultanates in the southern Philippines were powerful entities that were capable of fiercely resisting Spanish military forces, and so Mindanao and Sulu remained outside the colonial realm throughout the 300 or so years of occupation.

In 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American war, the Philippines was ceded by Spain to the United States under the Treaty of Paris. Although they were never part of Spain’s colony in the Philippines, Mindanao and Sulu were included in the treaty. Muslim Filipinos in the south strongly protested this action on the grounds that they were independent states, and U.S. military forces then became heavily engaged in battles to defeat armed resistance. By 1913, in the Battle of Bud Bagsak, the United States eventually succeeded in bringing Mindanao and Sulu into the new American colony of the Philippines. What followed were a variety of policies designed to integrate Muslim Filipinos into the larger mainstream Christian Filipino society. Despite the success of many of these efforts, armed resistance by various Muslim Filipino groups continued to break out periodically throughout American colonial rule and continued after the Philippines became an independent nation.

In the late 1960s, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed by Nur Misuari and armed rebellion again broke out in Mindanao. The causes of this rebellion are many, but have much to do with desires to re-acquire the status of a separate, independent state, or Bangsa Moro, wherein Muslim Filipinos would have greater access to and control over social services so that they could actually benefit from economic development in Mindanao. They also wanted to be able to protect their ancestral lands from being taken over by Christian Filipino or other multi-national corporations and settlers, and establish an Islamic way of life.
The inequities and social injustice that Moro Filipinos experienced and that finally culminated in outright rebellion had much to do with transmigration policies pursued both by the American and later national Philippine government. At the turn of the 20th century, Mindanao was still viewed by power-holders in Manila as “the last frontier”—a large and rich island whose physical and natural resources had yet to be exploited. The U.S. colonial government, hoping both to integrate local populations of Mindanao and Sulu into the larger society and to exploit these resources, initiated a homesteading policy designed to attract settlers from overcrowded regions of the central and northern Philippines to settle in what they saw as the under-populated southern Philippines. American and later Filipino policymakers felt that closer intermingling would spread the national culture values into this region and reduce the likelihood of continued armed resistance in the future. Much of the American interest in encouraging transmigration also had to do with the need to deal with increasing unrest among tenants and sharecroppers in central Luzon, where poverty, inequity, and a lack of American political ability to enforce a meaningful land reform was providing a fertile ground for communist insurgency. While the amount of emigration from the north to Mindanao remained relatively small throughout the American colonial period, it intensified in the decades after the end of World War II.

By the early 1970s, the immigration of Christian Filipinos to Mindanao had created a social landscape wherein Moro Filipinos and indigenous tribal Filipinos (Lumad) had become minorities in their own homeland. Violent encounters between both Moros and Christians, as well as between Christians and Lumads, had become common in Mindanao over rights to ancestral land, as well as the loss of political authority by local datu and their followers. Both Moros and Lumads felt that not only were their access to ancestral lands and other productive resources being lost, but that their cultural identities were being overwhelmed. It was during this period that the national government’s view of the ethno-linguistically diverse Muslim (Moro) Filipinos as “religious” minorities and the equally diverse non-Muslim, non-Christian (Lumad) Filipinos as “cultural minorities” sharpened.

Unfortunately, the initial governmental response in Manila to the rebellion of the Moro National Liberation Front was a military one, and fighting raged in Mindanao. The declaration of martial law in 1972 by former President Ferdinand Marcos also led to intensified military confrontations in the region. A number of efforts to quell the conflict were attempted, including the creation of a Southern Philippines Development Authority and interventions by the Organization of Islamic Conference and other international parties. These had little effect, however, until President Gaddafi of Libya intervened.

In 1976, the Tripoli Agreement was signed in Libya between the Philippine government and the MNLF. It provided for political autonomy for the thirteen provinces of Mindanao, Sulu and southern Palawan, which Moro Filipinos saw as their traditional homeland or sphere of influence. It also gave amnesty to the rebels. However, when then-President Marcos insisted on a plebiscite vote in the affected provinces to determine if local populations supported autonomy, the MNLF and its followers boycotted the vote. Only four provinces voted for autonomy, and so separate autonomous regions were established in Regions IX and XII. These autonomous governments were weak, and lacked political power and funding (May 2002:3).

The failure to gain real or meaningful autonomy also led to divisions within the MNLF, where disagreements between leaders of different ethno-linguistic and political factions existed. In 1977, Hashim Salamat, with a group of primarily Maguindanao-Iranun followers, established the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Nur Misuari, who was Tausug-Samal, remained the leader of the MNLF.

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1 Lumad is a recent term used to refer collectively to the non-Muslim/non-Christian groups, sometimes called “cultural communities”, throughout Mindanao, Basilan, Tawi-tawi and Sulu.
government-recognized MNLF. A second, mostly Maranao faction, the MNLF-Reformist Group, similarly revolted against the leadership of Nur Misuari.

In 1986, when Corazon Aquino became President of the Philippines, a new constitution was written that established provisions for a new Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (as well as a Cordillera Autonomous Region in northern Luzon, where communist insurgents were battling government forces). The MNLF did not participate in the design of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and the subsequent plebiscite again received popular support for joining the ARMM from only four of the thirteen provinces and none of the cities (May 2002:3). The conflict continued, and the ARMM remained weak in terms of political power and funding.

In 1992, President Fidel Ramos renewed negotiations with Nur Misuari and the MNLF, aided by Libya as well as the Organization of Islamic Conference. In 1996, an agreement was reached among all parties that established a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) and a Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). The SZOPAD would be comprised of the 14 provinces (one was added) and 9 cities recognized in the Tripoli Agreement and would be the focus of peace and development efforts. The SPCD was the legal body that consisted of a chairman, vice chairman, and three deputies, each of whom would represent the Christian, Moro, and “Cultural Communities” (Lumad). It was to be assisted by a Darul Iftah (religious advisory council) appointed by the chairman. The agreement also provided for a Consultative Assembly of 81 members, comprising the chair of the SPCD as head, the governor and vice governor of the ARMM, the 14 provincial governors and 9 city mayors of the SZOPAD, 44 members of the MNLF, and 11 representatives nominated by non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and people’s organizations. The Consultative Assembly’s functions were to serve as a forum to hear problems and defuse conflict, to conduct public hearings and advise the SPCPD, and to recommend policies to the President (May 2002:5; also see Rodil 2000).

This 1996 Peace Agreement provided for the employment of MNLF rebels (the Bangsa Moro Army) with the Philippine National Police, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and related special forces. For those who would not be absorbed this way, provisions were made for socio-economic development, cultural and educational assistance. It also provided for a new ARMM executive council, legislative assembly and administrative system that would have legislative power over agreed-upon areas of autonomy—such as Shariah law, and representation in the national government, including the Cabinet and National Security Council. Special provisions were included for the Muslim sectarian schools (madaris), such as the recognition of Arabic language instruction and Islamic values as part of their core curriculum. Nur Misuari later was appointed chairman of the SPCPD and subsequently was elected governor of the ARMM. A plebiscite again was scheduled by terms of the agreement for 1998. This plebiscite was not enacted until 2001. Only five provinces and one city voted in favor of joining the newly-defined ARMM. Nur Misuari was not re-elected governor, and he then proceeded to launch an armed attack on the national army. He later was arrested and turned over to the Philippine government by the Malaysian government, as he had tried to escape to the Malaysian province of Sabah on the island of Borneo to avoid arrest. He is currently in jail, awaiting a trial on charges of rebellion (May 2003:8).

The hope that this agreement engendered did not last. Christian leaders in Mindanao objected to autonomy and other features of the agreement. As a result, the final version of the executive order severely limited the ability of the SPCPD to recommend policy or actually control any aspect of government, and eliminated the 44 MNLF members in the Consultative Assembly. Peace remained elusive, as the MILF began to gather further strength amid suspicion that the national government was not really committed to peace or autonomy. The fact that very few real social or economic benefits ever accrued to average Moro (or Lumad) peoples and the reality of a host of failed promises led many Moro Filipinos to give up hopes for a brighter future through negotiation with the national
government. While the United Nations Multi-Donor Assistance Programme helped establish many Peace and Development Communities that includes Lumad and non-Muslim residents and which are led by former MNLF leaders, the conflict continued.

In 2000, the more militant Moro Islamic Liberation Forces’ attacks on non-Muslim communities in North Cotabato and Maguindanao led President Joseph Estrada to renew Philippine military assaults and war against them. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people and thousands of deaths resulted. It is not known how many people died. In 1996, the Armed Forces of the Philippines said that over a period of 26 years since 1970, more than 100,000 persons had been killed in the conflict in Mindanao. Of these, 30 percent were government casualties, 50 percent were rebels, and 20 percent were civilians. It was estimated that 55,000 civilians and soldiers had been injured, while nobody knows how many rebels were injured. During that 26 year period, the Armed Forces spent 73 billion pesos on the war, or an average of 40 per cent of its annual budget. Dr. Rudy Rodil, a member of the government negotiating panel with the MNLF and author of the book, *Kalinaw Mindanaw: the Story of the GRP-MNLF Peace Process, 1975-1996*, has noted that the cost of negotiating peace with the MNLF between 1992-96 was less than 60 million pesos. In 2001, after the Estrada administration’s renewed war against the MILF, the government said at least six billion pesos had been spent on the war in the year 2000—a billion pesos higher than what the government spends on building schools in the country. An additional 16 million pesos was spent on relief assistance to displaced persons and evacuees.

In 2002, Paul Dominguez, the Presidential Assistant for Regional Development, quoted preliminary findings from a World Bank Study that indicated that the economic cost alone, not including the social costs, of a never-ending conflict in Mindanao would be at least 2 billion U.S. dollars over the next ten years. That figure breaks down into 108 billion pesos for 10 years or 10.8 billion pesos a year. The figures were calculated by international economists who had other models such as Nicaragua to follow, and who likened the conflict in Mindanao to that of a never-ending war with periodic flare-ups. Southwestern Mindanao in particular, but also the ARMM as a whole, also was pointed out as having dropped to the bottom of the country in social services, including education, infrastructure, and income of the population.

To make matters worse, after the year 2000 war, the national budget of the Philippines rose from 725 billion pesos in 2001 to 780.79 billion pesos in 2002, and 804.2 billion pesos in 2003. Yet Mindanao’s share of this national budget declined from 13.9 per cent of the national budget in 2001 to 11.9 percent in 2002. In 2003, Mindanao’s share was only 10.55% of the national budget. Hence, while the economic cost of the war in Mindanao is very high, and the loss of life and social dislocation huge, the southern Philippine region as a whole paid an additional price in foregone benefits from the national government’s fiscal allocation.

In part, perhaps, as a result of these findings, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo embarked on a renewed effort to negotiate peace with the MILF. As of this time, October 2004, a Malaysian-led peace monitoring team has arrived in Mindanao and is expected to stay for up to a year. Formal peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF, brokered by Malaysia and involving representatives of the Organization of Islamic Conference, are expected to resume again in Malaysia in November after the end of the holy Islamic fasting month of Ramadan. The goal is to discuss a comprehensive solution that involves many different areas of concern to the Moro Filipino population, including self-governance, socio-economic development, Islamic shari’ah and education,

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a multi-cultural curriculum and recognition of ancestral lands in the ARMM (Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Marawi City). The leader of the MILF, Ebrahim Murad, has stated publicly that the 12,000 members of his group are united and committed to negotiating with the Philippine national government over a pre-agreed upon set of issues for resolving the conflict.
Chapter Two. The Tri-partite Ethno-linguistic Context and Root Causes of the Conflict

Underlying the basis of the conflict in Mindanao are struggles among the Moro and indigenous non-Muslim peoples for greater socio-economic development, equal recognition and support for their cultural and religious identities, and social justice. Dr. Rudy Rodil speaks for the contemporary view of the political and ethnic issues in Mindanao by calling attention to the fact that this region is composed of the “tri-people”, e.g., Moro, Lumad, and Christian settlers.

Muslims, or as they call themselves the Moro or Bangasamoro (“Moro nation”), are made up of 13 ethno-linguistic groups, including the Iranun, Jama Mapun, Palawani, Molbog, Kalagan, Kalibugan, Maguindanao, Maranao, Sama, Sangil, Tausug, Badjao, and Yakan. Today, Rodil estimates they comprise about 20 percent of the total Mindanao and Sulu population.

The Lumad, a generic term for the non-Muslim and non-Christian tribal groups, or “cultural communities” in Mindanao, are also very diverse. They consist of the various ethno-linguistic groups that are not Muslim, e.g., the Ata, Bagobo, Mamanua, Mandaya, Kamayo, Mangguwangan, Manobo, Mansaka, Matigsalog, Subanun, Tagakaolo, Tala-andig, T’boli, Tiruray and Ubo. Many of these groups are Christianized or partly Christianized, and some are partly Islamicized. Moreover, there is some overlap, such as the highland Christianized Maranao. These ethnic groups make up approximately five percent of the total Mindanao population, according to the 1990 census.

Christians also comprise an indigenous group in Mindanao, however, as almost 200,000 Visayan-speaking peoples of northern and eastern Mindanao were converted to Christianity during the Spanish colonial period. These include some peoples of Butuan, Davao, Camiguin island, Cagayan de Oro, Misamis Oriental, Iligan, Ozamiz, Dapitan, Dipolog, and the Chavacano of Zamboanga City, among others. These people have now integrated into the larger Christian population of Mindanao, but dialect differences, especially among Chavacanos, remain apparent. The Chavacanos were originally natives of Ternate in the Moluccan islands of eastern Indonesia, and were Christian. They were brought to Zamboanga and Manila in the mid-1800s (or earlier) to serve as soldiers.

The settlers, as most Christian inhabitants of Mindanao today are or are descended from, comprise 70 percent of the Christian Filipino population in Mindanao. Owing to the inability to distinguish those who have emigrated and those who have a longer history of residence in Mindanao, the 70 percent figure simply lumps them all together.

During American colonial rule, the Moro and Lumad Filipinos were categorized and administered separately as the Moro and Wild Tribes, as opposed to members of the “civilized” Christian majority. In 1957, the Philippine government formally declared that non-Christian Filipinos would be called the National Cultural Minorities. Later, as Dr. Rodil notes, the Constitutions of 1973 and 1987 re-labeled them respectively as “Cultural Communities” and then “Indigenous Cultural Communities”. The fact that all of these people are indigenous remains the enduring enigma of this kind of ethno-linguistic categorization.

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4 See “Re-establishing Order in the Community and its Connection with Biodiversity Conservation”, by Rudy B. Rodil. Paper presented at the Seminar Workshop on Conflict Transformation and Biodiversity Conservation, Cagayan de Oro City, July 11-13, 2003. Dr. Rodil has argued that the Muslim/Moro groups in Mindanao total 11, but he excludes several groups, such as the boat-dwelling sea nomads, the Badjao, which we have added here. ([http://www.mindanews.com/peprcs/peacetalk/rodil.shtml](http://www.mindanews.com/peprcs/peacetalk/rodil.shtml))
Dr. Moctar Matuan, Executive Director, Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, summarized in August, 2004, the history of peace efforts in Muslim Mindanao. He noted that in 1975 only the Dansalan Research Center was trying to address the negative images that Moro and Christian Filipinos in Mindanao had of each other through dialogue. At this point, violent conflict had already broken out in Mindanao. In the 1980s, a few other groups had joined, notably the Southern Philippine Center for Peace Studies at Mindanao State University in Marawi and the Peace Center at Notre Dame University. The issues they addressed focused on equality of rights, the need to maintain peace, and economic growth and development. In his view, President Fidel Ramos was the first president interested to pursue peace in Mindanao.

In discussing the range of issues that constitute the “Mindanao problem”, Dr. Matuan mentioned the following:

--poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction
--political corruption
--negative images held by Christians, Moro, and Lumad peoples of each other
--failure of the national government to integrate Moro peoples into a national Filipino identity
--the economic exploitation of Mindanao’s resources and the migration of Filipinos from the north that led to a loss of ancestral lands
--the Moro struggle for self-rule.

As he noted, all of these factors led to the reality today that many Moro and Lumad Filipinos are economically marginalized; politically marginalized; lack national recognition and respect for their unique cultural and religious identities; and feel a sense of insecurity, hopelessness, and resentment toward the national government. Rather than having the opportunity to express their grievances and receive assistance from the government, Moro and Lumad Filipinos experience massive poverty, social injustice, and are exploited by corrupt leaders and military commanders alike. The national Philippine government, from their viewpoint, is indifferent to their plight and so they do not experience feelings of belongingness or allegiance to the Philippine state.

The loss of ancestral land to in-migrant populations and the fairly rapid move from independent Islamic sultanates and local chieftainships to marginalized cultural and religious minorities remain at the heart of the Mindanao conflict. The total Islamized population of Mindanao was estimated at 39.29 percent in 1903; but only 20.17 percent in 1975. The total Lumad population was 22.11 percent in 1903; and only 6.86 percent in 1975.

The exploitation of Mindanao’s rich environment was easily captured first by American interests, later by more modernized, business-inclined capitalist Christian Filipinos, and also by multi-national corporations. Logging concessions, pasture land conversion, land titling through complex legal channels that Moro and Lumad Filipinos scarcely comprehended, and now mining concessions have led to an enormous loss of their homeland and resources upon which to develop their communities. Multinational companies opened up plantations and went into partnerships with Christian Filipinos to develop Mindanao’s resources, with little regard for the livelihood problems of the Moro and Lumad peoples and the growing resentment among many local inhabitants.

In this brief history, the unique tri-partite character of the conflict came into being. It is not simply a Christian and Muslim conflict, nor strictly an indigenous Mindanao resident versus in-migrating settler conflict. The politicization of the indigenous peoples into three separate

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5 Lecture delivered at the Follow-on Activities for the ACCESS Philippines project in Cagayan de Oro, August, 2004.
6 Rodil, op cit, p.7.
categorizations (Moro, Christian, and Lumad) has followed from relatively recent events in the 20th century. Prior to that period, these groups interacted, allied, traded, married, sometimes preyed upon each other as slaves, but were not crystallized into three opposing (yet diverse) groups. It is the process of marginalization, not only in the sense of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of Christian settlers, but by the loss of homeland and the fear of further erosion of their cultural and religious identities, that underlie the conflict.

In a recent article, Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo notes that the Philippine government’s analysis of the insurgency in Mindanao identifies four main roots of the conflict: 7

1. Poverty, including low productivity, criminality, marginalization, and environmental degradation;

2. Ignorance, including poor schools and education;

3. Disease, including malnutrition and poor access to health services;

4. Injustice, including violation of human rights, land conflicts, and graft and corruption.

What is surprising about this review of the roots of the conflict is that there is no mention of a lack of national concern to enhance and preserve the cultural, ethnic and religious identities of the diverse Moro and non-Muslim, non-Christian Lumad Filipinos in Mindanao. Yet it is only through the establishment of awareness and respect for ethnic and religious diversity among all peoples in the Philippines that a climate of tolerance and social justice is likely to come about in the south. The ACCESS Philippines project is designed to contribute toward that goal, especially by bringing youth of different ethnic and religious backgrounds in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and surrounding areas together to work for peace and to forge a bridge to a new future.

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Chapter Three. The Importance of Engaging Youth in Peace-Building Efforts

Standing at the threshold of the new millennium, today’s generation of young people in many countries are faced with numerous challenges. Men and women between the ages of 15-24 years are profoundly affected by the political, social, cultural and economic conditions of the societies in which they live. Many youth go through the life-changing period of adolescence confronted with issues of poverty, discrimination and armed conflicts, among other societal ills. While experiences may vary, one thing is quite certain -- these young men and women are feeling the pressures of globalization, technology advancement and the insecurity of world peace.

Many young people live in areas where their physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being is constantly being threatened by the vicious cycle of violence. Recurring insurgencies leave a devastating impact on the youth. Armed conflict and other forms of instability infringe upon young people’s right to lead normal, happy and productive lives. Deep-seated animosities and intractable conflicts passed on from generation to generation rob young people of their youth. The absence of peace breeds an environment that stifles their imagination, saps out their energy and encourages feelings of apathy and indifference. In some of the worst cases, such as Mindanao, periodic exposure to conflict has transformed youthful idealism into destructive actions and violent expressions of rebellion.

Reaching out to youth, who are the most vulnerable members of society, is becoming a priority in peace-building and peace-keeping efforts in many nations. A paradigm shift is occurring that places an emphasis on the active recruitment and visible integration of youth into efforts to promote and preserve peace. Leaders, scholars, activists and peace-loving advocates alike are painstakingly seeking the participation of the youth. Getting young people involved works both to protect and empower them. Their role in peace-building efforts is critical for the following reasons:

1) Intellectual Contribution
Young people have much to say about the things affecting them. Education provides them the intellectual and socializing ground to learn the values, attitudes and modes of behaviors crucial for creating a culture of peace. Through education, young people learn about the concepts of justice, tolerance, diversity, democracy, human rights, freedom, respect and mutual understanding, which are the key notions and principles that underlie peace. Their educational experiences enable them to construct meaning from their interactions with others and to critically engage each other with different perspectives of the world.

Even at an early age, young people develop social consciousness and awareness of the societies to which they belong. They are perceptive and critical. In the safe and conducive learning environment that education provides, youth can organize themselves to debate societal issues, raise pressing concerns, examine underlying biases and assumptions as well as question the status quo in the spirit of academic thinking and personal enrichment. They develop their faculties and abilities as well as acquire skills that empower them to take the initiative. Thus, by pursuing meaningful engagement of the youth, it is possible to encourage a great deal of intellectual contribution for peace development.

2) Mobilization of Mass Support
Today’s youth constitute a formidable force. According to United Nations estimates, young people comprise a total of almost 1.1 billion. They account for 18 percent of the world’s population and their numbers will continue to increase well into the 21st century. Their glaring number magnifies the importance of their role in peace-building efforts. Involving the youth also has a multiplier effect, spreading the impact of peace-related activities outward
to the greatest possible number of people. Young people can easily mobilize support by working in groups, teams, clubs, committees and by collaborating with NGOs, government officials, civil servants, community leaders and local residents. Their youthful enthusiasm can inspire wider participation, foster unity and promote a sense of belongingness that are instrumental in successfully mobilizing mass support for peace.

3) Unique Perspective
Youth normally seek to understand and make sense of the social phenomena they observe around them. With their new ideas and unbridled curiosity, they offer a unique perspective on promoting peace. They must be given a voice in order for them to be effective in sharing ideas, articulating opinions and making constructive inputs. Young people can offer multiple points of views, present alternatives and provide innovative approaches in dealing with community challenges and peace-related initiatives. For them to embrace the goals of peace and work towards achieving it, they have to feel involved, counted and appreciated. Their engagement is so valuable that it is important to see them as legitimate actors in peace-building efforts. They have to be part of not just the implementation aspect but also the decision-making processes. When young people feel they have a stake in the process, they are more than willing to capitalize on their unique strengths.

4) Leadership and Creativity
Time and time again, youth have demonstrated that they can capably assume positions of leadership effectively. They have been mobilizing resources, spearheading campaigns and casting a wide net of support for advancing the cause of peace and the call for social and economic justice. Given the opportunities and the support they need, young people will eagerly and actively take leadership roles in school activities, community-based action plans and other grassroots initiatives for establishing peaceful and just societies. Through their impassioned engagement and first-hand experiences, they put skills learned into practice, build competencies, gain confidence and build positive images of themselves. Harnessing their leadership potential and creative capabilities allow them to take control of their actions as well as make them proud of their contribution and of themselves.

The importance of engaging youth can never be over-emphasized. While significant strides in peace-building efforts are encouraging, young people can make them self-sustaining. They must be groomed for peace-building roles so they too will start believing that peace is possible in this world. They must be assured that they are supported and appreciated as they courageously embark on the long journey towards peace.

There is no reason to neglect the youth, especially in the quest for peace. Young people hold so much promise and so much potential. As Philippine national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, once said, “the youth are the hope of the Motherland”.


Chapter Four. The ACCESS Philippines Project “Bridging the Gap: Engaging a New Generation in the Southern Philippines in Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution”

Major Goals of the Program

In April 2004, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the International Training Office at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb, Illinois hosted a four-week Institute entitled “Bridging the Gap: Engaging a New Generation in the Southern Philippines in Interethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution”.

In an unprecedented event, thirty-three Muslim and non-Muslim Filipino students and adult leaders from the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and surrounding provinces in Mindanao arrived at Northern Illinois University through an ACCESS (Access to Community and Civic Enrichment for Students) Philippines project designed and funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

The major goals of the NIU Institute program were to 1) advance a dialogue and promote greater mutual understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim youth from the ARMM and surrounding provinces; 2) create a cadre of leaders that would work toward an enduring peaceful coexistence among all groups within the ARMM when they return home; and 3) promote a better understanding of the United States--its people, culture, values, and civic institutions.

The NIU Institute focused on four teaching emphases: 1) volunteerism and civil society, emphasizing particularly the institutions and organizations that mediate between the national government and individuals; 2) contemporary American institutions in state and civil society that support ethnic diversity, affirmative action, and religious pluralism; 3) the underlying premises and practices of conflict resolution; and 4) the historical and moral dimensions of similarity and difference that underlie majority/minority ethnic and political ties in Southeast Asia.

Recruitment and Selection Process

A total of 98 applicants applied for the open, merit-based ACCESS-Philippines program. Out of the 98 students, the Recruitment and Screening Committee, co-chaired by Dr. Susan Russell of NIU and Dr. Nagasura Madale of Capitol University, invited 10 males and 16 females to the U.S. based training program. Other members of the Committee included Attorney Marilen Ramiro, Dr. Teresita Hernandez, and Dr. Nita Bala of the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc. Dr. Thomas Kral, Cultural Affairs Officer of the U.S. Embassy in Manila, also was a member of the Committee. Dr. Noemi Medina of Capitol University was the Administrative Officer and participated in all phases of the interviews and ranking.

Youth participants, between the ages 15-17, were selected on the bases of demonstrated leadership skills, demonstrated interest in community service, strong academic and social skills, and a strong commitment to peace and unity. The criteria for selecting youth participants also included the ability to speak good English and having had no previous significant travel to the U.S. on a U.S. government sponsored program.

Five adult leaders (a local priest, three teachers and a social worker) were also selected to participate in the training program. The criteria for selecting the adult leaders include demonstrated leadership experiences, involvement in conflict management workshops and training, and familiarity with the inter-ethnic context of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.
The open, merit-based recruitment and selection process of the program was conducted by NIU through its partnership with Capitol University in Cagayan de Oro and the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc., and in consultation with the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy in the Philippines.

**Pre-departure Orientation**

A pre-departure orientation was held for the ACCESS Philippines group in March 2004 at the U.S. Embassy in Manila and at Philippine Normal University with the help of staff associated with the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy, Capitol University and the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation. The staff at Northern Illinois University had earlier put together a booklet on Pre-departure Orientation for this project which covered such things as what documents to bring to the U.S., money matters, housing, meals, and practical advice on cross-cultural adjustment.

**NIU Institute “Bridging the Gap: Engaging a New Generation in Southern Philippines in Inter-ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution”**

*(April 1 – 30, 2004)*

The NIU program provided the participants a coherent and carefully structured agenda that focused primarily on teaching diverse approaches for conflict resolution and ways of working collaboratively across ethnic and religious lines. During the month-long Institute, participants were engaged in activities consisting of workshops, seminars, field visits, cultural tours, volunteer work, meetings and dialogues with American peers, community leaders, government officials and other key individuals representing religiously and culturally diverse America.

**Orientation**

On the first morning after their arrival, the ACCESS participants were treated to a welcome breakfast and introduced to the staff at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the International Training Office. The Inaugural Ceremony formally commenced with a welcome speech given by Dr. Susan Russell, the Director of the ACCESS Philippines program. She spoke about her interest and research work in the Philippines, a country she described as beautiful and rich in cultural and religious diversity. She briefly discussed how the program was conceived, and presented an overview of the month-long Institute and its goals.

Dr. Lina Davide-Ong, co-director of the program, discussed the major components and logistics of the program. She gave helpful advice on how to make the NIU experience more meaningful and enjoyable. The participants, who were feeling both excited and anxious about their one-month stay in the United States, greatly appreciated the discussion.

The students were also given a cross-cultural orientation, which consisted of two phases. The first phase was a segment on “Concerns of Newcomers in America”. This session dealt with some practical information that the students needed to be familiar with, including such basic issues as using U.S. currency, using the telephone, time zone changes, overcoming jetlag and maintaining personal safety, among others. The second phase of the orientation was on “Adjusting to a New Environment”, which covered broad topics on acculturation and enculturation processes as well as stages of culture shock. The attention-grabbing segment on understanding American culture and American people enlightened the students about the ways of daily life in the United States.
The orientation also included sight-seeing tours of the NIU campus and the DeKalb area. The participants visited the DeKalb mosque to meet other Islamic students and members of the Muslim community. They were also invited to the Intercultural Café at the Newman Catholic Center, where a reception was prepared by the Friends of International Students, an active NIU community support group.

A formal Welcome Luncheon hosted by NIU was held a few days later, and included warm welcoming remarks by the Executive Vice-President and Provost, the Honorable Philippine Consul-General of Chicago, the Executive Director of the International Programs Division, and the ACCESS Project Director. The youth and adult participants of the ACCESS Program performed ethnic dances that showcased the rich diversity of cultures across Mindanao, Basilan and Sulu.

The following section presents an overview of the content and some student reactions to the various components of the NIU Institute.

Training Sessions, Lectures and Discussions

Managing the Learning Process
The objective of this session was to impress upon the students the responsibility they shared with the program coordinators in managing their learning expectations. In this session, individual learning styles of the participants were explored and major learning theories were examined. The session also included a segment on constructing and developing learning mission statements.
As a result of this activity, students came up with the following mission statements that guided their participation in the month-long training Institute:

“Our mission is to welcome new ideas of solving conflict and promoting peace, then examine and accept the best ones that suit the present situation in Mindanao and the Philippines as a whole”.

“As Young Ambassadors for PEACE, our mission is to initiate the fulfillment of Mindanao’s promise of Peace and Reconciliation”.

“We are here to broaden our knowledge on conflict resolution to promote change in our country, the Philippines”.

“We are here to participate. We are here to learn. We are hoping that there will be greater chances for a better world and we will be part of it”.

“We aim to be active participants in every activity so that we would have individual learning on conflict resolution and peace-building through observation of different cultures to promote world PEACE.”
Conflict in Mindanao: A Historical Perspective

This session presented a historical perspective for understanding the conflict in Mindanao by underscoring the idea that in writing history, humans often bring their biases. One group of people is portrayed in a positive light while another group slips into oblivion. The conflict in Mindanao, although caused by several confounding factors, was characterized as a historical by-product of ethnocentrism.

The concept of ethnocentrism---thinking one’s own culture to be superior to that of other cultures---stimulated students to think and relate the societal implications of ethnocentrism to experiences of marginalization and discrimination they have encountered and heard about in their communities. Speaking specifically on the issue, a youth participant noted that “history books must be written to erase the distorted image of Muslims”. What should be written are things which could foster better relationships among the peoples of Mindanao, he added.

This introductory lecture on Mindanao conflict captivated students’ attention and inspired them to embrace the challenge to tear down the invisible walls of prejudice and bridge the gap among Christian, Muslims and Lumads in Mindanao.

Conflict Management and Communication

A training session on conflict resolution and communicating across religious and ethnic lines helped students become familiar with some basic tools and terms used in the field of conflict resolution. They were introduced to the five conflict management styles (accommodate, compromise, avoid, compete and collaborate) and main approaches for resolving conflict. They also learned several ways of fighting hate and discrimination. Through a personal survey or profiles, students discovered the ways that they have previously dealt with conflict in their lives and learned how to select the best style to effectively deal with conflict in their future interactions.
This lecture was followed by a jigsaw puzzle with the objective of allowing the students to discover the conflict management styles of each team member. The simple but effective approach reinforced students’ understanding of the different conflict management styles. They also recognized the importance of teamwork to achieve a common goal. Another desirable outcome of the activity was that students realized that each one of them holds the potential to resolve conflict constructively.

**Tools for Promoting Equality and Celebrating Diversity**

In another session on conflict resolution, the participants learned the importance of promoting equality and celebrating diversity through watching the film entitled “The Shadow of Hate”. Produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the film helped students understand the historical roots of intolerance and hatred in America. It provided them with helpful ideas for identifying different approaches for fighting hate and discrimination.

The documentary film poignantly roused the students’ consciousness of the dark side of America’s racial past. They learned about the historical roots of racism, injustice and hatred as they watched the tribulations endured by generation after generation of immigrants. It enabled the students to draw comparisons between America’s experiences with racism, intolerance and injustice and the Philippine’s struggles with its recurring problems. While the film dramatically showed the ugly head of intolerance, it also filled students with hope:

> “Like America, Mindanao is also a haven of different races. It is struggling with unresolved problems. America overcame lots of mobs, wars and depressions yet it ended up peaceful and successful. They succeeded because of collaborative efforts and the willingness to change its past. We could still achieve our goal of peace. Like America, the Philippines could also be a great country. Each one should act as an initiator of peace----one who examines his biases, works to overcome them, works for tolerance and speak out against injustice”.


**Distinctions between Morals, Religion and Social Conventions**

This lecture explored the ways of resolving conflicts by focusing on the distinctions between moral and religious issues and social conventions. A conceptual model called “Scenarios of What Works” -- a plan of action that is workable, realistic and applicable for conflict resolution, was presented as a strategy for resolving conflicts. Students were asked to think about conflicts that revolve around moral issues and conflicts that are based on social
conventions. Identifying the nature of conflicts was a challenging learning experience for the students, who are periodically exposed to the deep-seated religious animosities and ethnic conflicts in Mindanao.

There was a session on forgiveness wherein participants learned several steps of forgiving in relation to managing and resolving conflicts. Through role-playing, the students examined some of the moral and ethnic issues that they encounter in their personal lives and devised ways of applying their conflict management skills to these real-life experiences.

**Perspectives on Indonesian Conflicts and Community Initiatives for Conflict Resolution**

Two NIU graduate students from Indonesia gave a lecture on the multi-faceted conflicts that are affecting the lives of Indonesians. They presented an overview of the country’s political history, followed by a sharing of personal accounts of involvement in community initiatives and grassroots campaigns for conflict resolution. Inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogues were emphasized as potent tools for abating conflicts.

Students showed renewed interest in participating in the discussion. Everyone was actively involved in the learning process because the topic struck a familiar chord. Students felt at ease with the lecturers whom they were able to identify/relate with because of the striking commonalities of Indonesian and Philippine experiences with conflicts. The lectures substantially broadened students’ knowledge on conflict and community initiatives. They became inspired to do something about the conflict in Mindanao:

“It was a déjà vu for me. I see the Indonesian conflict within the Mindanao context. But I am inspired by her words. The mere explanation of her programs gave us suggestions on what we can do to solve the conflict in our respective places. Her contributions really influence my ideas on how to process action plans. Now I have an idea on what to do.”

Another documentary film was shown to deepen students’ understanding of America’s culturally pluralistic society. Narrated by young people, “A Place at the Table” tells the story of America's struggle to ensure liberty and justice for everyone. After viewing the film, students were asked to articulate their thoughts and reactions on the film and relate the core issues to their experiences in their homeland. Through interactions with one another the students were then asked to make a commitment to become more tolerant of others and to become allies of one another.

Here are students’ thoughts on the impact of the film:

“If “A Place at the Table” is the core issue of diversity in this U.S., “Laying the Table” is a fundamental concept that must be grounded on the Philippine soil. It isn’t just an American tale. It is also our story. Our life. Our journey. The Filipino youth’s struggle”.

“The film made me cry. It made me realize that I am imperfect. It made me realize also that I can do something about my imperfections. I would like to bring my DETERMINATION to the table. I would like to share this determination of making a difference with everyone”.

“We have our own choice or preference. We cannot force a person to like another person. It does not matter if you like the person or not. But always have that RESPECT. We all have our bitter past. But right now, we should make the first move. Understand others and acknowledge diversity. We have differences but we also share underlying values to get us over our differences”.

"A Place at the Table (Southern Poverty Law Center)"
Participatory Community Empowerment and Developing Action Plans

This lecture focused on the basic assumptions of community development and the significance of people’s participation and collective action. It discussed the process of needs assessment and the implementation of a bottom-up approach for community development and empowerment. Students were also provided with a structural framework for designing their action plans.

“I learned that community development is a step-by-step process that needs not just the blueprints of action plans but also the concern or awareness of the important roles that people play in attaining specific goals. In designing our action plans, we should consider the people as part of our plans. The more knowledge we have about our target community, the greater the chances that we can implement our projects successfully.”
- Youth Participant, April 22, 2004

This session reminded the youth participants to reflect on the factors shaping the reality of their environment and to lead initiatives that will empower the communities and mobilize people to realize the goal of a peaceful coexistence among Christians, Muslims and Lumads in Mindanao.

Interfaith Youth Core Leadership Model

To probe deeper into the topic of shared values on leadership, students were asked to consider questions such as “What is faith?” and “What is leadership?” A constructivist teaching approach was employed to allow the students to define their own understanding of the terms faith and leadership to teach the essence of Interfaith Leadership.
While leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills, the session emphasized the need for interfaith leaders to develop a deep commitment to listen intently to others, especially those from different faiths. Students learned that to be an interfaith leader, one needs to listen to others without rejecting one’s own faith commitment. Students were inspired to build “a community of communities” where everyone will be empowered to “think big things and take small steps” for peace in Mindanao.

**Integrating Faith, Diversity and Social Action**

This session highlighted the importance of integrating faith, diversity and social action to reinforce interfaith leadership. The Interfaith Youth Core Leadership Model was presented to help students understand the essence of sharing values, beliefs and knowledge and welcoming interactions among peoples from different faith traditions. The idea that conflict between religious communities can be reduced by bringing young leaders together across geographic and religious boundaries was stressed.

The speaker facilitated the discussion by building a good rapport with the students and drawing out the leadership qualities of each one. Students learned that leadership is all about relationships with people, but interfaith leadership is about communicating across ethnic and religious lines.

**Theory and Practice of Creating Partnership Among Faith Communities for Social Change**

As “Architects of Peace,” participants were taught to embrace story-telling to enrich one’s encounter with fellow human beings. In the journey towards creating a culture of peace, it is important to reach out to other people and become humanized by learning the living experiences of others. This session was theoretical, but contained practical aspects of how to create partnerships among faith communities for social change. Dr. Martin Luther King’s Theory of Peace was discussed, as well as the lives of famous peace leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh and Malcolm X.
The students later watched a movie that depicted how one can discover strength in diversity through love, service and commitment. A youth participant expressed his commitment to be an “Architect of Peace” with the words:

“I’m holding on to what I have just learned -- “Think big things, take small steps.” My fellow participants, we must dream big. We cannot change the world overnight but we as the youth, we have all the opportunities and strengths. We have the advantage to make a change. We’ve got to do things now. The dream starts now and we are behind that dream”.

-Youth Participant, April 22, 2004

They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the U.S.
This session dissected the racial and ethnic relations in the U.S. from a sociological perspective. It familiarized the students with the history of immigration and issues of discrimination and social movements for racial and ethnic equality. It increased students’ understanding of America’s pluralistic society.

The presentation was straightforward but it captured the attention of the students from beginning to end. There were so many questions that came out from the inquisitive minds of the students that the Question and Answer portion of the session lasted for 2 hours. Knowledge of the social demographics of the United States turned out to be a very meaningful learning experience for the students. They were really able to connect the lessons they learned from the session with their intercultural experiences and their face-to-face contact with America’s culturally diverse population.
Peace Learning Center Workshops
On their third weekend, ACCESS Philippines participants headed to Indianapolis, Indiana for training workshops at the Peace Learning Center (PLC). PLC provides a variety of conflict management trainings and services empowering local communities to discover responsible ways to deal with conflict, intolerance and prejudice.

The two-day workshop at the PLC consisted of conflict resolution sessions, dialogues, discussions and role-playing. The sessions were well-facilitated, organized and interactive. Participants observed ground rules and followed a clear-cut agenda for each day. The group dynamics that emerged from the sessions indicated that the participants enjoyed engaging in the learning activities.

The sessions on building a culture of peace left an indelible imprint in the minds of the participants. Using the Socratic Method, the facilitators helped bring into fore the knowledge that the participants have for resolving their conflict situations in the southern Philippines in order to attain peace. They have the answers to their social and personal problems. The Peace Learning staff implicitly believe that the participants are not “empty vessels” into which ideas can be deposited. Rather, the participants are active subjects of history and of their own lives.
Workshop on Civil Society and Human Rights
In essence, the speaker wanted to impart the notion that “civil society” (all elements other than the state) can play a positive role in the attainment of peace. He emphasized that the objective of peace in society can only be attained by peaceful means such as through dialogue, interacting with others, learning about others, breaking stereotypes, and working together to bring about a harmonious relationship among all groups and individuals in society.

Workshops with NIU Tagalog Class
NIU offers Tagalog language classes from the beginning to advanced levels. American and Filipino students mingled and interacted with one another in several subgroups. They had fun building a community (using Lego blocks), answering the Zooley game, and making posters. It was an intercultural experience that everyone enjoyed.
Workshops on Integrated Arts
The workshop entitled “Touch HEARTS- The Integrated Approach to PEACE” focused on teaching peace through the arts, specifically through theater. The participants started with a physical activity called “Molding a Lump of Clay into a Beautiful Sculpture,” a metaphor that compares human beings to a lump of clay. Conflict occurs when people resist being “molded”. Through the second activity, “Pulling the Elephant,” the participants learned that misunderstandings can lead to chaos.

The workshops helped students understand that using arts through an integrated process can be a powerful tool for transforming feelings into responsible actions. They learned that art can be a potent instrument for bridging the gap and achieving peace.

Workshops on Closing the Gap Between the World’s Religions

In this workshop, the participants grouped themselves according to their religions: indigenous religions, Muslims, and Catholics and discussed the core values in their respective religions. From the activity, participants learned that despite having different faiths, people in fact share some core values expressed in different ways. They discovered that some basic values tie all the religions together; such as love (in Christianity), peace (in Islam), and belief in one God (called by different names).

In another workshop entitled “‘Kapit-Kamay Tungo sa Kapayapaan” (Hand-in-Hand in Peace), participants learned 12 skills on how to resolve conflict. The facilitator also presented a segment on “Pagkakaisa at di-Pagkakaiba” (Thinking of Unity, Not Differences), which helped in empowering students to reach out to one another and celebrate their commonalities.

The interactive activity was then followed by a documentary film entitled “Tutu and Franklin: A Journey towards Peace,” referring to Bishop Desmond Tutu and Dr. John Hope Franklin. It was about 21 young people with 5 different religions who desired unity, harmony and peace. The participants saw themselves in those youth in the film.
Volunteer Service at Hope Haven
As part of their immersion experience, the participants went to Hope Haven -- a non-profit organization that provides temporary shelter for the homeless. Doing volunteer service at Hope Haven had at least two positive effects on the ACCESS participants. First, it made them realize first-hand that, just like Filipinos, not all Americans are rich or have homes. Second, it made them understand the value of volunteer community work that benefits the whole society. The participants were emotionally affected by the experience. It made them see the “other side” of America. Some participants realized that suffering and difficulties are universal: that everyone everywhere in the world experiences some kind of deprivation and abundance.

Tour of the Amish Community in Arthur and Arcola, Illinois
The participants had another opportunity for cross-cultural experience during their trip to the Amish Community in central Illinois. They learned about the Amish people, who are direct descendants of the Anabaptists of sixteenth century Europe. The Amish people follow the religious tradition interpreted by Jacob Amman.

At the Amish Interpretive Center, they watched a film that introduced the Amish community to “beginners.” They then toured the Center’s museum where, among others, an Amish woman was actually making a quilt. After visiting the Center, an ex-Amish woman escorted the participants in the bus for an ocular view of the Amish community. The ex-Amish guide explained the religion, practices, beliefs, attire, habits, customs, daily life, schooling, and work of an Amish family. As she was once an “insider,” she had the best “inside” information any escort can give “outsiders” or “tourists” to understand the Amish people.

The participants were surprised that despite “globalization,” the Amish people are still able to preserve their simple way of life. They were amazed with everything they have learned and seen. Many said it gave them bright ideas to share back home; for example, the concept of keeping one’s cultural tradition and way of life despite modernization. It was definitely an eye-opener and a great learning experience for the group.
Trip to Springfield, Illinois

After visiting the Amish community, the participants went to Springfield, the State Capitol of Illinois and to Abraham Lincoln’s residence and Lincoln’s Tomb. An in-house tourist guide showed the participants the interior of the State Capitol building. Everyone was impressed with the grandeur of the State Capitol as such. The Lincoln Home tour was well worth it. Participants enjoyed having the chance to visit the home of a former president. Now they can proudly claim that they have been to a historic home, the residence of a prominent U.S. President, and that what they read about in school, they now have seen and touched!

Visits to DeKalb and Sycamore High Schools, Illinois

Participants of the ACCESS Philippines program had opportunities to meet with their American peers. From their dialogues and interactions with DeKalb High School students, participants reveled in learning the different racial identities and ethnicities of American students and developed friendships with them. Youth participants also learned about key student organizations such as the Voices of Diversity Club, which they were excited to replicate in their schools in the Philippines.

In another encounter with American students, the participants were able to exchange ideas, insights and experiences with Sycamore high school students. The Filipino and American students explored their cultural differences and discovered surprising similarities in topics ranging from the educational system and political institutions to Britney Spears and the realm of pop culture. They also had lively discussions on the differences between being a youth in the Philippines and in America.
Visit to the Islamic Foundation in Villa Park, Illinois

The visit to the Islamic Foundation in Villa Park, Illinois provided the participants with an opportunity to meet and interact with high school Muslim students in America. The Islamic Foundation is one of the most active and leading Islamic organizations in Illinois, and the Chicago region is home to over 400,000 Muslims. It was established to fulfill the religious, educational, social and cultural needs of the Muslim community in Chicago’s surrounding areas. In a speech delivered by a young Muslim student, the participants learned about the challenges that Muslim teenagers face in America. They gained insightful perspectives on what it means to a religious minority in the United States. The participants also engaged in a dialogue with American Muslim students wherein both groups took turns asking a wide range of questions that helped them learn more about one another. Participants were also given a tour of the campus. The Islamic Foundation is situated in a unique Islamic setting that includes a large Masjid. Muslim participants visited the mosque to say their prayers, accompanied by their fellow non-Muslim participants. The events that unfolded on this day deeply instilled the values of religious tolerance and respect.

Cultural Trips to Chicago
To further enrich their understanding and appreciation of America’s religious and cultural diversity, the participants visited the Bahai Temple, the Beth Emet Synagogue, and Chinatown. Their cultural tours included the Sears Tower, Navy Pier, the Chicago Architectural River Cruise, Shedd Aquarium, the Planetarium, the United Center, among others. The participants enjoyed every minute of the trips. They were proud of the “Philippine Coral Reef” and “Philippine Fish” exhibits in the Shedd Aquarium.
**Home Stays with American Host Families**

A distinctive feature of the ACCESS program are the home-stay arrangements with American host families. The NIU program staff was able to recruit families in DeKalb, Sycamore, and Rochelle, Illinois. Coming from diverse religious and racial backgrounds, the American families welcomed the Filipino youth participants into their homes. For eight days, the participants had the rare opportunity to live with their American host families and gain first-hand experience of the “American” way of life.

Home stays were very exciting for the student participants. During the latter part of the program, the students incessantly talked about the activities they did with their families and reveled in things that are seemingly mundane, such as eating cereal for breakfast or watching baseball and sports on TV with their foster siblings. They sincerely appreciated the gestures of kindness, generosity, hospitality, understanding and support that their American host families showed to them. They were overwhelmed by the attention and care American families exhibited to them, even though they were strangers.

It was a great inter-cultural experience for both the American families and the youth participants. Students learned so much from their Americans families while sharing their own Philippine and ethnic cultures. The home-stay experience changed students’ perceptions and stereotypes about the American people. One of the host mothers described her experience as the most rewarding home stay with any international student that her family had ever experienced. In a significant way, host families exhibited to the students the values and principles of the American people, and many remain in touch with the students back in the Philippines.

**Developing Action Plans**

During the latter part of the program, the students and adult leaders developed and designed their individual “action plans”, as well as their regional plans for Western Mindanao, Central Mindanao, and Eastern Mindanao. The main objectives for these action plans were to: (1) build and expand the network of young peacemakers that this project has created; (2) instill an appreciation for diversity, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue; and (3) build a community of “communities” in their home areas and schools.

Many students planned to start diversity clubs in their schools that will celebrate the different cultural and religious groups. They also planned to hold meetings in their schools to expose others to the knowledge of conflict resolution that they learned here at NIU. Some planned to host symposiums on peace and conflict resolution in their schools, sponsor essay writing contests on the problems in Mindanao, while others planned artistic forays such as hosting theater groups that portray the diversity and tragedy of life in much of the conflict-ridden areas of Mindanao. Each student and adult identified the activities, objectives, methods, time frame, likely obstacles, resources needed, and outcome of their proposed individual activities.

**Graduation Ceremony**
The graduation ceremony was attended by university administrators, faculty and graduate students involved in the ACCESS project, as well as by the host families of the students. An interfaith series of prayers (Muslim, Christian, and Lumad) were offered by representative students of each group, which had become a tradition throughout the NIU Institute. Following that, a number of speeches and presentations were made by project directors and student representatives, as well as a representative of the host families. Certificates were given to each graduate of the training program, and each student was given a rose to hand to his host parents. The final event was a surprise dance and theatrical production put together by the ACCESS participants that dramatized the horror of war and the need for inter-ethnic reconciliation and peace.

Follow-on Activity in Mindanao

From July 30 to August 4, 2004, participants of the ACCESS program gathered together for the follow-on activity phase of the program at the Chali Beach Resort and Conference Center in Cagayan de Oro City in Mindanao.

Organized by Dr. Nagasura Madale and Dr. Noemi Medina, the in-country coordinator and administrative officer respectively, the follow-on program reconnected the students with their adult leaders, fellow youth participants and program staff. It was the first time that the group was reconvened after their U.S.-based NIU Institute. Also in attendance were Dr. Susan Russell (Project Director), Ronald Post (Counselor for Public Affairs, U.S. Embassy), Atty. Marilen Ramiro (Executive Director of the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc.), and Atty. Casimiro Juarez (President of Capitol University). A variety of IVP and non-IVP members participated in the training sessions, including Gloria Seno.

The follow-on activity was a six-day program that was designed to bring the participants together and re-ignite their interests in pursuing the goals of the program. The following section highlights the main sessions and outcomes of the follow-on activity, focusing on learning activities that inspired and
committed youth and adult participants to take small but significant additional steps toward the journey for peace in Mindanao.

**Clarifying the history and causes of conflicts in Mindanao**
Right after the opening ceremony, Dr. Moctan Matuan of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, gave a long talk on the “Peace Efforts in Muslim Areas of Mindanao”. He documented the history of these efforts, beginning at Dansalan Research Center in the 1970s. He made the important point that violent conflict between Moro and Christian Filipinos erupted in Mindanao long before anyone became interested in peace efforts within the region, at least in relatively recent history. He spoke of the various peace organizations and NGOs presently working in Mindanao.

Another prominent scholar on Mindanao history, Dr. Rudy Rodil of Mindanao State University-Iligan, conducted a session on the history of the Mindanao conflict. He also talked about the history of peace negotiations and cultural interaction among Moros, Christians and Lumads based on his personal experiences. He made the point that at the beginning of Christian migration to Mindanao, there was peace among these groups. It was only later when conflict, discrimination and hatred became so engrained in the biases and stereotypes among different ethnic and religious groups. His discussion of his involvement in a former Philippine governmental effort to bring peace to the region (prior to the establishment of the ARMM) revealed the very deep and emotional nature of the conflict in Mindanao.

**Sharing stories of success, failures and lessons learned**

One of the major objectives of bringing the participants together again was to provide an avenue for sharing their stories of success, failures and lessons learned. During the second day of the follow-on activity, participants discussed their experience and memories while at NIU and their experiences from May to July upon returning home and implementing their action plans. To dramatize their actual experiences, students performed “role-playing” and skits. These ranged from skits (such as a TV talk show host interviewing ACCESS participants about what each had been doing since
returning home) to short dramatization about successful or not-so-successful peace activities or projects that the participants had tried to implement at home with their families or in school with their schoolmates.

The Basilan students presented a video of their one-day training on inter-ethnic dialogue and conflict resolution at a local military camp; the students were assisted by a Catholic nun. The adult leaders’ activities were especially noteworthy and more elaborate. Adult leaders from Basilan had an entire package of materials documenting their activities; another adult leader from Cagayan de Oro presented a visual documentary of her and her students’ accomplishments since they returned home to Xavier University.

**Additional Training in Conflict Resolution & Inter-ethnic Dialogue**

An important component of the follow-on program was a series of training workshops on conflict resolution and inter-ethnic dialogue facilitated by Gloria Seno. Building on participants’ knowledge of conflict management strategies, the follow-on sessions were designed to sharpen and strengthen students’ interpersonal and conflict management skills and rekindle their commitment to the overarching goals of the ACCESS program.

In one of the learning activities, students were engaged in a cultural role exchange, where male and female groups were asked to come up with stereotypes about gender, American versus Filipino cultural traits, and intergenerational stereotypes. The interactive approach that was employed resulted in a stimulating exchange of ideas, insights and perceptions between the two groups. The lively and animated way that the entire group participated indicated that they loved the segment on culture and inter-cultural communication in conflict resolution.

Participants were also engaged in a reflective thinking process of examining their involvement in the ACCESS program. By picking a line or two from popular songs (“Man in the Mirror” by Michael Jackson and “Where Is the Love” by the Black Eyed Peas), students were able to relate the lyrics they chose to the goals of the program. They drew metaphors of their commitment and posted their drawings in the walls. Seated on the floor in a circle and holding each other’s hands, participants together with the program staff reflected on what the program meant to them. With spiritually inspiring music played in the background, the activity erupted into an emotional outpouring of affection and support for each other. It was a session that renewed their commitment and strengthened the emotional bonds among everyone on the project.
With a renewed sense of purpose, youth participants were reminded to relive the wonderful experiences they shared and become “storytellers” for peace. To help them carry out such a mission, participants explored how to use videos to make real-life stories of peace, conflict and discrimination that would resonate with the viewers in their communities. They learned the ways of integrating technology to promote peace in the segment on “Pathways to Peace: Where do we go from here?”

**Presentation of Action Plans**

All of the students had already made presentations about the ACCESS program to family, friends, religious leaders, school officials, as well as in a variety of other kinds of organizations and venues they participate in, including elementary school outreach, training and leadership seminars. The follow-on activity gave the participants another opportunity to redefine and modify their action plans for promoting the goals of the program.

The action plans the students presented during the follow-on activities were a mixture of what they have done and what they plan to do, together with a timetable (by month) and the resources they would like to have to make these projects successful. These range from simple needs like paper, pens, and other supplies for poster contests and some artistic workshops for peace, to desires to have money to send out invitations and flyers, pay transportation fares, make t-shirts for club members, rent a sound system, cameras, videos, and purchase food.

An in-depth example of a seminar already conducted by students was the Diversity Round-Table (subtitled “You must be the change you wish to see in the world”) that the Zamboangueño group presented at Pilar College on July 24, 2004. The impact of the NIU program is vividly demonstrated, as many of these things were presented to participants in sessions at NIU, in Chicago, and at the Peace Learning Center in Indiana.
One of the highlights of the follow-on program was the community service activity. ACCESS participants along with the program staff went to a very diverse but depressed barangay on the outskirts of the city. The group visited a couple of school rooms packed with elementary school kids of different levels, seated on makeshift tables and benches. Youth participants sat with schoolchildren and fed them with rice congee, prepared by nursing students from Capitol University.
After the feeding program, community leaders and local residents, including Bajau migrants from Sulu, welcomed the group with a short presentation. In what was supposed to be a re-enactment of how they manage conflicts in their community, but was instead a real conflict, the Bajau men and women ended up arguing against a Visayan woman, who represented the other local residents.

Issues of sanitation and hygiene emerged as the concerns expressed by the Visayan woman against the Bajau people. The conflict, however, had to do in part with linguistics since no one in the barangay understood the language spoken by the Bajau group. As the groups continued arguing but hardly understanding each other, an adult ACCESS participant from Sulu intervened in a manner that enabled her to communicate in a language that the Bajau people understood. After some discussion, the Bajau and Visayan women ended up shaking hands.

The ACCESS group’s participation in the community service activity allowed them to gain first-hand experience in conflict mediation. What emerged from the incident was a real-life mediation scenario, initiated and facilitated by an ACCESS participant. Seeing one of their adult leaders successfully mediating the dispute between the two groups was a powerful experiential learning for the youth participants. It placed into context the roles they play in fostering inter-ethnic understanding. In addition, it translated lessons learned on conflict resolution into practice.
The participants later ended their community service activities with a visit to the Gardens of Malasag-Eco Park. Situated in a botanical garden setting, the Eco Park is a cultural village that showcases the practices and crafts of Mindanao’s indigenous people. Students walked along the rolling terrains and looked at the different ethnic style of houses. They went to the ethnic souvenir shops and talked to a Kalagan (Lumad) weaver who made small bags that some students bought to send back to their American host families.
Refined Action Plans
Youth participants and adult leaders of the ACCESS program demonstrated and reaffirmed their commitment to the goals of the NIU Institute “Bridging the Gap: Engaging a New Generation in the Southern Philippines in Inter-ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution” in the follow-on activities by re-designing and refining individual and regional action plans anchored on a culture of peace and non-violence.

Convinced of their role and potential to engage a new generation of young architects of peace, the ACCESS youth and adult leaders pledged to continue to pursue the following plans of action:

Action Plans for promoting self-awareness
- **Re-echoing of Lessons Learned**
  Since their arrival from the U.S.-based training institute, participants have been organizing and leading several workshops, seminars, symposia, peer-to-peer discussions and dialogues in their schools and local communities. Varying modes for re-echoing lessons learned have been devised by participants to highlight the importance of self-awareness as a key towards resolving conflicts peacefully and constructively.

Through embracing the vision-mission of the ACCESS program, youth participants are engaging their fellow youth, friends, family members to become agents of change and allies for peace.

Action Plans for promoting awareness of Mindanao and its people
- **Peace-Building Talk Series (A Course on Conflict Resolution and Mindanao Peace)**
  A youth participant attending college at the Ateneo de Manila has developed a course on conflict resolution and Mindanao peace as the theme for the Peace-Building Talk Series held every 2nd and 4th Saturday of the month at the Lauan University Center. The objective of this course is to promote awareness of Mindanao through exploring its geography, learning its culture and understanding its problems.

  Following the structure of the NIU program, the course is subdivided into several phases that include topics on Mindanao and its People; Conflict in Mindanao; Conflict Management & Resolution and Preparation for Action Plans. It aims to underscore the importance of learning conflict management styles, peace-building skills and peer-mediation strategies in the context of the contemporary peace and order situation in the southern Philippines.

- **A Place at the Table**
  Four young peace advocates of the ACCESS program have a vision of creating the largest youth diversity movement in Zamboanga by forming an organization known as the “A Place at the Table” (PAT). Founding members have articulated the vision of “creating a community of communities and giving voice to the sustaining conviction that the promise of equality will be true not just for some but for all”.

“A Place at the Table” is committed to the mission of instilling among the members the eagerness to sit down at the table together, embrace honesty in facing the hard truth and reality of the past, and examine how communities and attitudes are shaped by a painful history. Engaging diverse groups to find their “Place at the Table” is designed to bring into the forefront the youth’s stance of negotiating a more just, equitable and harmonious future for all Zamboangueños and Mindanaoans.
The organization enjoys a unique character through the establishment of Diversity Round Tables. It is a social, non-political and non-profit student organization of the Ateneo de Zamboanga University College Department in partnership with five priority schools: 1) Ateneo High School; 2) Filipino-Turkish High School; 3) Pilar College High School; 4) Immaculate Conception Archdiocesan School; and 5) the Western Mindanao State University-Integrated Laboratory High School.

**Action Plans for fostering “unity in diversity”**

- **Interfaith Youth Core (Marawi Team)**
  Eight youth participants are building an Interfaith Youth Core patterned after the Chicago-based youth network. With a vision to provide opportunities for the youth to realize the essence of “Unity in Diversity”, the team has been conducting peace and diversity workshops for high school students at the Dansalan College Foundation, Inc. and the Mindanao State University-Integrated Laboratory School. Another series of workshops, the Inter-school Seminars, are scheduled to be conducted in November, 2004, which will serve as a prelude activity for the formal launching of Interfaith Young Leaders, which is what the newly-formed group will call itself.

  Key players of the Interfaith Youth Core are working towards bringing young people together to embrace “Unity in Diversity”. By sharing the lessons learned on peace education and peer-mediation strategies, ACCESS participants are creating a new social landscape for Marawi’s youth to work towards achieving unity while celebrating religious, ethnic and cultural identities.

- **Voice of Diversity Club at Basilan National High School**
  Focusing on the themes of gender equity and tolerance of cultural and religious differences, the Voice of Diversity Club was created to challenge the Basilan National High School students to look beyond their personal boundaries or comfort zones and lessen, if not eliminate, the stereotyping and harboring of biases against people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and labeling people based on his/her sexual orientation.

**Action Plans for developing peace education programs & activities**

- **Mindanao Tripartite Youth Peace Camp**
  Volunteering as facilitators for the recently held Mindanao Tripartite Youth Peace Camp, two students from Central Mindanao stepped up to the challenge of institutionalizing peace and promoting mutual understanding among Christian, Moro and Lumad youth in the region. Through teaching conflict resolution tools, developing peace-building skills and enhancing leadership roles, ACCESS participants have passed on lessons learned to other young people of Mindanao. They have contributed to the spirit of inter-religious dialogue and are promoting the essence of inter-ethnic cooperation.

- **Developing A Culture of Peace in Is-Lam (Isabela City & Lamitan)**
  Noting that simplicity is the key towards developing a culture of peace, the Basilan ACCESS group is conducting peace education programs for the youth of Is-Lam, which represent Isabela City and Lamitan. The Isabela-Lamitan Partnership endeavors to empower character development as a way towards developing a culture of peace among key players in Mindanao—the civilians and the military. Peace education programs will be taught by using the ARTS as a medium for touching HEARTS.
The development of peace education programs is anchored on the framework of igniting a desire for social change among the peoples of Is-Lam so that the dream of a peaceful Basilan can become a reality.

- **Children’s Peace Festival**
  The largest gathering of children and youth in Basilan was held last May, attended by one of the ACCESS adult leaders who is affiliated with the institution sponsoring the event, the Christian Children’s Fund. About 2,000 children and youth participated in the weeklong festival, which showcased a wide variety of dances, theater, songs, skits and bands, as well as songs of peace. The Children’s Peace Festival is celebrated annually “to support the children and youth toward achieving their own concept of peace”.

- **Conflict Resolution Seminar (Phase 2)**
  The seminar will focus on teaching conflict management techniques and peer mediation strategies to youth leaders. The other objective of the seminar is to provide youth leaders a broader focus for understanding the conflict in Mindanao. Participating youth leaders will then be expected to apply what they learned in their own schools and communities.

- **Poster-making Contest for the Youth**
  A Poster-making contest for the youth has been organized as a step towards bridging the gap among the tripartite peoples of the municipality of Sungko Lantapan, Bukidnon. The target audience for the contest includes interested Lumad youth, ages 7-13 years old, as well as the Christian and Moro youth who are residents of the municipality.

**Action Plans for advancing positive youth development for at-risk individuals**

- **Orientation for Out-of-School Youth**
  Believing that everyone can be a peacemaker, a youth participant organized an orientation about peace that reaches out-of-school youth in Marawi City. The success of the orientation has led the Marawi Team to replicate the action plan in another place in Marawi, expecting a greater number of out-of-school youth participants.

- **Symposium on Child Soldiers**
  As part of the Culture of Peace Seminar, a symposium on Child Soldiers was conducted last May, 2004. Child soldiers who are members of the Citizen’s Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU) participated in the activities that allowed them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, perceptions of being a soldier and role identification. The symposium provided the forum for child soldiers to communicate among themselves and to learn more from one another. They were taught about positive values and the importance of being good role models to earn respect and attain peace and order in their communities.

- **Muslim Student Association (MSA)**
  This organization was purposely created to promote understanding of Islam and its teachings to interested parties and to develop mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. ACCESS participants who comprise the organization’s Executive Board are working on proposals for inter-religious dialogues. They are opening up avenues for the youth in their areas to understand and appreciate the importance and meaning of “dialogue” in communicating cultural and religious differences and developing tolerant and accepting attitudes.
Action Plans for promoting the spirit of volunteerism and community activism

- **Community Outreach Program (Clean-up Drive)**
  In keeping with the spirit of volunteerism and camaraderie, members of the Interfaith Youth Core (Marawi team) are planning to render their services to do a “Clean-Up Drive” in the surrounding areas of their province. This community outreach activity is one of the component programs that the team has planned to accomplish this year and the next. The Clean-Up Drive will be held with the purpose of enhancing community activism, gaining the trust and confidence of the people and making the team’s peace-building efforts visible so the public will believe in and share their goals as peacemakers and volunteers.

Action Plans for integrating technology in peacebuilding

- **Creation of a Website for the Diversity Round Table**
  The development of a Diversity Round Table website will serve as a viable resource for providing information about the organization, the ACCESS program and other peace-related documents and learning materials that member schools and other interested parties can access anytime. It will also serve to help make the coordination and networking for the Diversity Round Table easier and more manageable.

Actions Plans for broadening organizational membership for PEACE

- **De La Salle-Ateneo de Manila-University of the Philippines Alliance**
  An alliance of major universities in Manila has been formed by ACCESS youth participants who are attending these three academic institutions. They have pursued Inter-Cultural and Inter-Ethnic Youth Forums, Inter-Religious Youth Forums and Peace Seminar Workshops as well as Outreach Programs with the students from those universities.

  The over-arching purpose of forging the alliance is for the ACCESS participants to obtain recognition of their contributions to peace-building efforts and gain membership to the National Youth Commission, which is the official organizing body for youth development programs in the country. The National Youth Commission was enacted in 1995 through the Republic Act 8004. It serves to ensure that Philippine youth will have opportunities to become active partners in nation-building.

- **PeaceWeaver’s Club**
  Emphasizing the role of the youth in peace-building efforts, the PeaceWeaver’s Club in Davao City was created to provide avenues for ACCESS youth participants to conduct training in peace education and conflict resolution. The goal is to inspire youth members to take proactive roles in the country’s peace process and become courageous advocates for peace.

- **Young Ambassadors for Peace (Ateneo de Davao High School)**
  The Young Ambassadors for Peace club was created with the aim of establishing a group of young students who will be the ambassadors of a culture that embraces tolerance and diversity and abhors discrimination and violence. The organization, spearheaded by three ACCESS youth participants, now enjoys a total of 65 young and committed ambassadors for peace. It aims to inculcate in every member a spirit of volunteerism through sharing lessons learned during the NIU Institute.
Final Outcomes
In order to intertwine the ACCESS Philippine participants with other organizations in the country and to support their efforts to bring peace to Mindanao, the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc. and the U.S. Embassy in Manila are supporting their action plans and providing thoughtful advice and assistance. Northern Illinois University and Capitol University staff are doing the same, and staying in touch by e-mail.
Chapter Five. The Current Status of Peace Efforts in Mindanao

Efforts to attain peace in Mindanao come from all fronts. They take place at the individual, local, regional, bureaucratic, state, and international levels. There are domestic Philippine initiatives and foreign support as well as government and non-governmental actions. Very importantly, governmental and rebel representatives are willing to discuss their differences and reach a settlement of the conflict. Actors such as the Philippine state, civil society, ordinary citizens, foreign observers, foreign states, embassies, and organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), as well as the United States and Australia have a vested interest in solving the problems in Mindanao. All actors contend and understand that peace can only be attained if there is social and economic justice. Poverty and rebellion are closely intertwined.

The follow-on activities of the ACCESS Philippine program confirm that ordinary citizens, students, the youth, community organizers, and other elements of civil society have a concrete and major role to play in the piece-by-piece resolution of the conflict in Mindanao. Instead of merely thinking big, individuals who espouse Christianity, Islam, and other indigenous faith systems, can build peace one person at a time by starting with themselves and spreading the goodwill to their families, friends, communities, schools, places of worship, and society at large.

During the holy Islamic month of fasting, or Ramadan in 2004, several countries started to be involved in the peace efforts in Mindanao. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) supports the Mindanao peace process, wherein Malaysia plays a prominent role. Recently, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, when she attended the Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM) on October 7 to 9, 2004 in Hanoi, Vietnam, thanked Southeast Asian and European leaders for their support of the peace process with the MILF (Mindanao Times, October 4, 2004). The MILF has wide popular backing in the countryside, where poverty and underdevelopment have promoted rebellion (BBC, 2004).

Negotiators for the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the 12,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) agreed to create the International Monitoring Team (IMT) when Malaysia hosted their meeting from February 19 to 20, 2004 in Kuala Lumpur. The talks between the GRP and the MILF started in January 1997, soon after the GRP signed the Final Peace Agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). However, after the start of the talks, former President Joseph Estrada ordered an all-out war against the MILF headquarters in Camp Abubakar in Matanog town of Maguindanao, and Arroyo ordered the Philippine Army to assault known MILF lairs in Pikit town of North Cotabato. Calmer attitudes have prevailed since then in the Arroyo government, but hostilities and claims that some rebel factions of the MILF are providing safe haven to members of the Jemaah Islamiyah terror network have hurt the peace process and continue to cause concern among all parties over the viability of peace negotiations.

Various scholars have expressed both misgivings and hope for the resolution of the conflict in Mindanao. Abhoud Syed M. Lingga (2004), Executive Director of the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies, argues that peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF will not be enough to establish a sustainable peace. He states that a new formula is needed that ensures the participation of the Bangsamoro people themselves in deciding the direction of their future political relationship with the national government. He proposes that a referendum be held that offers the Bangsamoro peoples a choice of political status between expanded autonomy, a federal relationship, or independence. Following that, he notes the need for the deployment of third party peacekeeping forces to prevent further hostilities.

Morgan (2003) raises some serious cautionary notes about how such a referendum could be of assistance in resolving the conflict, given the multitude of stakeholders, issues and actors involved in the conflict. Mindanao is now home to a majority Christian population, while many Lumad hold
ancestral land claims throughout the island. She argues that each group in Mindanao would have to have a serious role in the referendum process in order to assure fair representation and ultimate support for the outcome. In her view, civil society is the place for this kind of dialogue to begin, rather than with a referendum, and Christians, Moros and Lumad need to negotiate and decide how best to create an interdependent, not independent resolution to the conflict.

On what basis could a common set of understandings support such a dialogue? Dr. Nagasura Madale (1999) has suggested that a search for a unifying ideology of identity might begin with the very notion of nationhood, or bangsa/bansa. For example, the Maranao (people of the lake) believe they are all descended from one common lineage (salsila) and call this concept merepeda sa posed (e.g., each one is a part of a long umbilical cord). The belief that every Maranao is a part of this one common lineage can be traced to two sources: 1) the mythical folk hero, Radia Indarapatra, and 2) the Islamic source, Sharief Kabungsuwan. According to this oral narrative, their children intermarried and came to the Lanao lake region and converted the Maranao to Islam. Islam also brought with it a much broader concept of universal brotherhood – the ummah, or the Islamic community that transcends geographical borders, races and ethnic identities. According to this concept, all Muslims are brothers and sisters and can be envisioned as one body—if any part of the “body” suffers pain, the whole body feels it.

In contrast, Christian Filipinos adhere to the concept of pan-Christianity—one bread, one body and one soul. These concepts are comparable community concepts, as in the Christian concept bajo de campana, “under the bell”, and Islam’s bajo de masjid, “under the mosque”. While this still leaves the equally diverse Lumad beliefs in the middle, they, too, have concepts of belonging to one community that intersect with those of Muslim and Christian Filipinos.

The educational system of the Philippines has long attempted to play an assimilative role, or that of a unifying institution designed to mold the national minorities into a singular personality—a Christian Filipino. Many Moro Filipinos, however, cling tenaciously to their identity of being a Muslim, and belonging to a much larger community of Muslims in spite of the national government efforts to create a political alternative of accommodation. The creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao was a political gesture on the part of the national government to create a resemblance to the Sultanate system that would still be anchored on the Philippine constitution and sovereignty. While very imperfect, it nevertheless was designed to provide political accommodation without total devolution of power.

Can the ARMM serve the purpose of building a new sense of nationalism and national identity among the Bangsamoro? There are many ways to look at this issue. On the one hand, there are Islamic institutions and concepts, especially in education, that are being initiated to accommodate the Moro desire for “national integration” into the larger national political scene without losing their ethnic and religious identity as Muslims. The ideology and framework of the ARMM is not devoid of the western concept of the “separation of church and state”, and many Moros recognize that it is one way for the national government to address their century-old dream of self-governance. On the other hand, the framework and ideology for the institutionalization of the ARMM was based on the majority Christian concept of popular democracy and the concept of the separation of church and state. Many Muslims feel that it should have been anchored on the ideology of Islam’s din-un-Islam, a way of life. Also, while some instrumentalities of national government were devolved to the ARMM, there are other aspects of bureaucratic control which were not devolved. Finance, taxation, national security, foreign affairs, the exploration of natural resources within the region, and the yearly budget allocation are still under the full control of the national government.

The IMT is monitoring the implementation of the GRP-MILF ceasefire agreements. Representatives from Malaysia, Brunei, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Japan compose the IMT.
The IMT would set up its head office in Cotabato City and satellite offices in the cities of Zamboanga, Iligan, Davao and General Santos. The Cuban, Argentinean, Brazilian, Chilean, and Venezuelan ambassadors to the Philippines collectively praised the GRP and MILF efforts to work for peace in the southern Philippines. If an effective and presumably sustainable peace agreement is signed, the United States, Australia, and some members of the European Union will provide assistance to Mindanao. All actors concur that the economy and politics are equally important issues and directly connected: they go hand in hand and one is not more important than the other. If poverty is alleviated and the life of the people is improved, crime and revolution will subside. By the same token, if there is relative order and stability, the economy will flourish. The political relationship between the MILF and its break-away factions, civilian stakeholders, and the national government today remain an arena of intense speculation, negotiation and diverse opinions.

At the end of the day, is peace elusive? Pessimists claim that peace is nowhere in sight. Optimists, however, argue that peace comes piecemeal, one person and one activity at a time. The ACCESS Philippines project is dedicated to this latter goal, and to creating a new generation of empowered youth leaders from all faiths and ethnic groups in the southern Philippines who desire to make a sustained peace a reality. Respect, appreciation, tolerance and national reconciliation depend on a broader understanding of the conflict and history of the peoples of Mindanao, and this project is one step in that direction.

Selected References


Appendix A: Excerpts from Essays written by ACCESS Participants

Central Mindanao

Cagayan de Oro City

“We have to dig deeper into the core of the issue. We have to understand why these things are happening. And then start accepting each other’s differences, set aside our personal agenda and think of the others instead.”

Cecilia Alexandra Niza
Capitol University
Religion: Catholic
Ethnic Identity: Ilonggo

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Marawi City

“Christian brothers and sisters, please do not make generalizations about us. Muslim brothers, please do not do anything which can alter the image of Islam as a whole. Always remember that by being good, God is always with us.”

Jamaleah L. Benito
Dansalan College Foundation, Inc
Religion: Islam
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

“Why don’t we just help the government to improve and develop our respective communities to be more productive in whatever we do in life. I think we should all unite and be one. We are already divided by waters so let us not allow religions, beliefs, traditions and politics totally divide us further.”

Juhairah M. Cadir
MSU Integrated Laboratory School
Religion: Islam
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

“Let us destroy the walls of misunderstanding and mistrust. Let us open the doors of communication and understanding. Let not politics interfere in the negotiation. The whole nation must move now to heal its wounds.”

Sittie Ayeesha M. Dicali:
Dansalan College Foundation, Inc.
Religion: Islam
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

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“Mindanao has become the conflict capital of the country because of selfishness, too much pride and over-desire for political power of some people. Let us start doing something about them one step at a time.”

Ambayanan B. Manding  
Dansalan College Foundation, Inc  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

“We should not use our pride. Let us open our eyes to the reality, to the sufferings of the people because of these conflicts. There should be mutual respect between Muslims and Christians. If we’ll just respect, love, care for, and help one another, we will be united… Inshaallah.

Johayrah R. Mindalano  
Dansalan College Foundation, Inc.  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

“History books must be rewritten to erase the distorted image of Muslims. What should be written are things which could foster better relationships between Christians and Muslims. And then start an inter-ethnic dialogue for a peace process to grow and develop.”

Fahad A. Pimping  
Marawi Foundation Academy, Inc.  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Maranao

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Bukidnon

“The government should show its concern for the indigenous peoples and that traditional cultures be given due respect and recognition. They should be given equal services just like other citizens of this country.”

Salima S. Saway  
Bukidnon National High School  
Religion: Apu Magbabaya  
Ethnic Identity: Talaandig

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Eastern Mindanao

Davao City

“Peace can start within us. Peace can start from the youth. We should start teaching the children the right values. We should be more responsive to the country’s call for peace.”
Menard Pete Dacono  
Ateneo de Davao University  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Ilonggo

“The government should look into the problems of the ethnic tribes vis-à-vis the powers of the military and the local officials. It’s high time that issues and concerns emanating from them be taken quite seriously.”

Paola Joy Fernandez  
Assumption College of Davao  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Cebuano

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Maguindanao

“The gap is not unbridgeable. Let us try to understand the main root of the problem. Apply the proper solution. Stop the betrayal. Present realities show that a bridge can be built for mutual understanding. Let’s just continue these peace efforts so that solutions can evolve.”

Joanna Loren J. Ochia  
Notre Dame of Cotabato, Inc.  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Cebuano

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Cotabato City

“What we can do now is to reconcile different ethnic groups and be united in our common goal in attaining peace. Let us learn to accept our differences.”

Jeffrey S. Aliudin  
CCSPC Laboratory High School  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Maguindanao

“It is high time that the government revise its policies towards our native inhabitants and address the root causes of the problem. Then we can look forward to a nation where there is solidarity, harmony, equality and respect for human rights.”

Carell Ryza E. Nartatez  
CCSPC Laboratory High School  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Ilonggo
“Let us help each other, let us not pull each other down, get rid of this so called “crab mentality” so that conflicts will be minimized.”

Nahannie D. Kamensa
Notre Dame University
Religion: Islam
Ethnic Identity: Maguindanao

“People must learn to understand that they must all cooperate in working for the attainment of peace and to forget their own selfish desires.”

Farrell Hazsan E. Usman
Notre Dame University
Religion: Islam
Ethnic Identity: Maguindanao

“If we should only practice respect and love for others in spite our differences it would not be difficult for us to attain peace. If justice prevails and equality reigns, we could have a productive and harmonious life. The key to success is in our hands.”

Rainier Gem A. Machitar
Notre Dame University
Religion: Catholic
Ethnic Identity: Ilonggo

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Western Mindanao

Zamboanga City

“The welfare of this nation rests in its people’s hands. It is up to us now to take the move. We should not fear today’s evil for it shall pass, but rather, we should fear the day when our children would wake up in a world where unity is impossible and freedom non-existent.”

Mary Rose Jean Andrada
Ateneo de Zamboanga
Religion: Catholic
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño

“We should set aside our grievances and self-interest. Hope lies in the hands of those who have convictions and ideals. We should strongly believe that this country is not hopeless. We should believe Filipinos can stand together as one.”

Wilric C. Asuncion
Immaculate Conception Arch. School
Religion: Catholic
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño
“We should live in unity with the mutual interest of striving for the best. We treasure our diverse religious convictions and various cultural traditions, but we have a common denominator: we are Mindanaoans and we are all Filipinos!”

Mark Kenny S. Macrohon  
Ateneo de Zamboanga  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño

“Peace in Mindanao is an elusive concept, but strides can be made, one step at a time. I hope to initiate change, it can be small in magnitude, but change leads to revolutions, and this is where my peace begins.”

Henry F. Segovia  
Pilar College  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño

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**Basilan**

“A dialogue is the most appropriate forum to deliver unheard pleas and to find a peaceful solution to end this conflict. Views from both sides must be heard and fully considered for the sake of peace.”

Marion B. Guerrero  
Basilan National High School  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño

“The rich and the powerful should be made to realize that they are somehow contributing to people’s loss of hope, loss of dignity, absence of a good life which consequently cause conflicts to set in.”

Mark Conrad R. Ravanzo  
Claret School of Lamitan  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Zamboangueño

“Let us mold a community where Muslims and Christians live in harmony and unity. Let the youth show that my idol, Senator Benigno Aquino was right when he said that “the Filipino is worth dying for.”

Amor Jade A. Miguel  
Claret School of Lamitan  
Religion: Catholic  
Ethnic Identity: Cebuano

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**Jolo, Sulu**

“If we are just willing to admit our mistakes and be ready to unite with our fellow Muslims, there’ll be no conflict, then peace shall prevail.”

Fermina Y. Omar  
Sulu State College Lab. High School  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Tausug

**Bongao, Tawi-Tawi**

“Peaceful negotiation is the only right course to take. Sincere cooperation and understanding is vital to a lasting resolution of the problem. Let the tragedy end and let peace and development begin in the spirit of freedom, understanding, unity and co-existence under one nation!”

Fatimah Sheridana L. Kadil  
MSU-TCTO Science High School  
Religion: Islam  
Ethnic Identity: Sama-Tausug

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**What do the youth say about what is happening in Mindanao?**

**Carell Ryza E. Nartatez (Cotabato):**

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippines. It is a rich and beautiful land peopled by different ethnic groups of diverse faith, culture and traditions such as Muslims, Christians and Lumads. Being strategically located and endowed with abundant natural resources, scenic tourist spots, rich and varied culture, this part of the Philippines could have attained economic progress and development if not for the problem of peace.

**Nahannie D. Kamensa (Cotabato):**

Mindanao is an island with a culture and history quite different from the rest of the Philippines. Its population is divided into three distinct groups, the indigenous people which constitute 18% of the population, the Moros (Muslims) 20%, and the Christian settlers, 62%. Mindanao is very rich in natural resources. It has almost all the resources needed for development but unbelievably, until now, it is still underdeveloped. Why? The current peace problem could be the reason. The peace and order situation in Mindanao remains fragile. Worn down by an endless cycle of violence, civilians in the Southern Philippines are now starting to take action. Residents in predominantly Muslim Mindanao areas are arming themselves and preparing to fight the rebels if necessary.
Mark Kenny S. Macrohon (Zamboanga):

The southern part of the Philippines has been plagued with an unstable peace and order situation with slow economic progress in many areas. The seacoasts and fertile lands have big potentials for development. Apparently, Mindanao’s potential for becoming an economic hub has had little effect with the current situation.

Fermina Y. Omar (Jolo, Sulu):

Mindanao today is undeniably in crisis and one of the biggest problems that the Muslims are facing is the peace and order situation. Whether we like it or not, we the Muslim youth are very much affected by these conflicts. Brutal murders, kidnappings, robberies, harassments, political warfare, clan disputes, drug trafficking, ambush on innocent people are happening here and there. These are violations of human rights that have become a common occurrence in our society. We are no longer sure of our safety, we are always living in fear, of dangers that may come.

Rainier Gem A. Machitar (Cotabato City):

The biggest problem that greatly affects the southern Philippines is the issue on peace and order. For a long time, this unresolved problem became the source of fear of people in Mindanao. Oftentimes, a lot of crimes, injustices and oppressions happen in this once peaceful community. And that’s what our brothers and sisters are mostly afraid of. But what is really behind it? What are the root causes of this endless problem?

Jamaleah L. Benito (Marawi City):

As a child, I used to describe Mindanao as a beautiful and peaceful island and believed that it was truly a Land of Promise. Now it has become a Land of Conflicts. It has become the refuge of terrorists particularly the Al Qaeda terrorist group, Jamaah Islamiyyah, Abu Sayyaf and Moro Islamic Liberation Front. They are sending chills to every individual living in the area. Who would forget what they did to their hostages from Sipadan and Palawan islands? It’s unfortunate that they chose Mindanao as their refuge.

Fatimah Sheridana L. Kadil (Jolo, Sulu):

Southern Philippines today is deeply immersed in a protracted war. Life in the area has been very difficult and uncertain for many people and has been tragic for others. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have been fighting the government for a separatist cause and the gangsters like Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been pestering the country with its kidnap-for-ransom activities.

Jeffrey S. Aliudin (Cotabato City):

Peace and order condition in our community remains an issue. It has never been solved and never been acted upon effectively. Terrorism is one of the causes. The recapture of the Indonesian bomber Fathur Roman Al-Ghozi is vital to the cause of fighting terrorism. He has been identified with some foreign terrorists also training in Mindanao.

Sittie Ayesesha M. Dicali (Marawi City):
Many battles had been fought and tarnished the good name of our country. Peace talks had begun and had given us hope but then negotiations sometimes stalls leaving no remedy for the sick Moro land. Too much controversies and intrigues had made the problem into a maze which seems to be impossible to define. In the meantime, innocent bloods continue to stain the hands of the fighters on both sides.

**Wilric C. Asuncion (Zamboanga City):**

Political and economic instability, crime and terrorism are constant threat to peace. This is the predicament of the Philippine society that will be inherited by us and by the generations to come after us.

**Marion B. Guerrero (Basilan):**

The conflict in my own native land has been raging for a long time now staining the lush verdant plains with blood of innocent people. We live in a world where chaos and strife have changed the course of life. Conflicts have changed the image of a once beautiful land.

**Fahad A. Pimping (Marawi City):**

At age sixteen, I have observed the sad plight of the people, the sufferings they have experienced in this part of the country. Before election time, politicians would promise the people that they will develop the community and make it a peaceful and bountiful place to live in but those words remained unfilled. Perhaps that is the reason why this part of the country is called the “Land of Promise.”

**Mark Conrad R. Ravanzo (Basilan):**

Conflict is actually happening here in Basilan, my home place. Since I was young I have already heard lots of clashes, struggles, of people engaged in battles, victims here and there but I can not really understand why these are happening.

**Johayrah R. Mindalano (Marawi City):**

Peace seems so elusive in our land. We want peace; in fact we need it in attaining progress in this side of the earth… but how? Conflicts cut the channel that bridges the Moros to their Christian brothers. Apathy and discrimination work side by side to disrupt the possibility of discarding pride and prejudice in the hearts of people living in one community.

**Paola Joy A. Fernandez (Davao City):**

The Lumads, Moros and other tribes in Mindanao are living their lives based on their beliefs and culture. Most of them are not exposed to modern technologies and are contented and satisfied with what they have and make the most out of it. But what do people think and know about them? Some groups call the Moros “killers”. Others call them “rebels” or “lawless people”. As a Filipino youth living in Mindanao, I had the chance to interact with these people. It was truly a privilege. When I saw and heard them speak about their problems and struggles, it makes me feel sad and bad knowing their situation. What is really happening to these people? What is happening to the Moros and Lumads who are also Filipinos like me?
Menard Pete P. Dacono (Davao City):

Media has made me aware of the present situation of Southern Philippines. However, the Mindanao talks and seminars that I had attended deepened my understanding about conflicts. The ruthless kidnapping of rebel groups and the bomb threats urged me to know the roots of these problems.

What do the youth say about why these things are happening in Mindanao?

Carell Ryza E. Nartatez (Cotabato City):

Mindanao with its vast economic potentials has been plagued with rebellion, strife and conflicts. Failure of the government to answer the needs of the people, corruption, decades of neglect, exploitation of their ancestral lands and domain, disregard for their faith, culture and traditions, prejudices, biases, and inequality have contributed to animosities which are deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of the natives. Somehow this led some groups to rebel against the government. It is an indication that the national leadership has failed to view the issues and concerns of the people in this part of the Philippines with the right perspective.

Mary Rose Jean Andrada (Zamboanga City):

We rely so much on the government for solutions. It is as if we expect our President to fix everything in an instant never thinking that it is not easy to handle an overpopulated country with uncooperative citizens. I believe that one thing that keeps Southern Philippines unstable and the Filipinos confused is our ignorance of ourselves. We are just one nation, but we have forty-seven uniquely different dialects. This hasn’t caused any misunderstandings among our ancestors before but it is becoming to be a big issue today. Moreover, the young ones do not have the same patriotism as our ancestors yesterday. We often hear senior college students now, striving in their studies not because they want to serve their best to their country, but for them to be able to go abroad and make money. And then again we say that we are a strong people, unbending to anyone who forces evil on our country. But are we really one beyond words? Can we stand up to those who threaten to manipulate our beliefs and fight for them through legitimate means? Are we aware of the fact that we are so easily persuaded by other lawless people? Do we know our leaders well enough so that we can proudly say that corruption does not exist in our government institutions? Are we not like brainless dogs tailing around our local leaders and following them no matter how unreasonable they had become? Do we trust them enough to submit our life at their disposal? Do we have enough courage to be able to raise arms and fight for our nation as one people until our very last breath? Do we get justice when we are trespassed? These are the questions most Filipinos refuse to acknowledge. We prefer to move on with the fast flow of the modern world and absorb ourselves into building our own “safety” walls and hide ourselves from its realities. We deny the fact that we are no longer the strong Philippine nation we once were; that the freedom that our forefathers have died for is slowly slipping from our grasps.

Henry F. Segovia (Zamboanga City):
Mindanao history stands like a cross, questioning, denouncing, and at times shattering our porcelain beliefs and china creeds. I grew up trying to understand fully what my young mind cannot: our people’s lack of will to culturally understand each other. The quest for belongingness seems endless; the search for meaning appears distant. Yet, as I go through discovering myself, I discover others.

**Menard Pete P. Dacono (Davao City):**

What I knew from my history class, Mindanao wasn’t completely conquered by the Spaniards. It is during the time of Sergio Osmeña when the misunderstanding between the Christians from the north and the Muslims in island Mindanao started. He made Mindanao a free island where people from other places in the archipelago could acquire land. The Mindanaoans thought that they were deprived of their rights and of their lands. Furthermore, the differences in culture of these two groups had set a boundary between them. This hasn’t been resolved until now. I had this experience with other student leaders in Mindanao and we discussed about people’s misconceptions of Muslims and Moros. The Muslims among them said that they felt discriminated because some of the people think that all Muslims are like the rebel groups in Mindanao. We did not know that they are also deeply affected by what fellow Muslims are doing. I have also realized that Muslims are not the prime movers of the disunity in Mindanao – the enemies are the people with nonsense motives and selfish interest.

**Fahad A. Pimping (Marawi City):**

History books have contributed to the existing discrimination against the Muslims. Some books make it appear that Christian Filipinos are first class citizens and the cultural communities are second class Filipinos. Another factor is politics. The elected local officials no longer want to step out even after finishing the three terms in office because they still want to keep the power until such time that their own children are ready to take over. They go to the extent of killing their opponents, bribe the voters during election time, or even organize a group that would be ready to kill those who come across their way. Thus, too much politics and greed for power becomes an obstacle to the attainment of peace and development in Mindanao. Violation of human rights is another factor. The Muslims violently reacted when their Mosque in Davao City was bombed and so many of them, innocent ones, were also killed. They believe that destroying their place of worship means disrespect and curtailing their freedom to worship. Many still believe that the military forces of the government are the brains of this event.

**Jeffrey S. Aliudin (Cotabato City):**

I have heard that the military has played a big role in these conflicts in Mindanao, that they distributed guns and ammunitions to the rebels themselves who had claimed many lives of people. Very pathetic!

**Farrell Hazsan E. Usman (Cotabato City):**

The incomprehensible differences in the way people live their lives and practice their own faith become the basic reasons why conflicts remain unsolved here in Mindanao. It is
common for local officials to take advantage of the weak, the poor and the needy in the community. They abuse their powers for their own self-interest. They take advantage of the less fortunate people who expect to get love and care from them. However, there are still so many people who remain blind, deaf, and weak to even make a move to change for a better future. The different religion (faith) of the people is another factor in the unending war here in Mindanao. The leaders of different sects stand for their principles and beliefs and fight for what they believe is right and just. But they really do not know who greatly suffer the consequences of their acts.

Rainier Gem A. Machitar (Cotabato City):

Of the factors that could have contributed to the conflicts in Mindanao, religion is the first. Religion has caused misunderstandings among Muslims, Christians and Lumads. Their different beliefs and practices have created gaps between them which became complicated to solve. If they could just openly accept each other’s perceptions and beliefs, peace could be attained. Peace should start from ourselves. Second are the politicians. These politicians are divided into two characters: one is good, responsible and a trustworthy leader and the other is irresponsible and corrupt. Good leaders should be praised and honored for their essential contributions to a peaceful and progressive community. But those power-hungry leaders, they should not receive credit for anything. They are a big disgrace to the people; they hold on to their position for power and authority. They are just using their positions for some personal interests and for some illegal businesses. Instead of working for the welfare of the people, they only make the situation worse for them. Third is terrorism. Until now it remains a question when it would end. We cannot blame our fellowmen who are fighting for what they believe in. They are fighting for justice and equality which seem unattainable. A great number of innocent lives had already perished because of these conflicts!

Paola Joy A. Fernandez (Davao City):

One of the major problems is militarization. The military accuse some groups as rebellious so they take advantage of them and the worst thing is that they hurt women and children. This is a problem for quite a time already. Another problem is about land of ethnic tribes, the land of their ancestors. Where will they live? Where will they make a living? They surely wouldn’t want to live in the city where most people discriminate them. This is also one of their major problems too. People, not knowing their culture and beliefs, discriminate them and make fun of them instead of showing respect and equal treatment as Filipinos. Another problem is their source of livelihood. Businessmen buy the products of farmers at a very low price but sell them at a very high price. That is the reason why farmers remain poor. Added to this is the problem on the education of their children and the youth. Their schools are too far and the government does not provide the necessary resources like the books, teachers, and other supplies. The school children have no means of transportation so that they have to walk a long way to their schools. Wouldn’t that be too much hassle and too tiring for them? Does the government know about these problems? Yes, they do, but our local officials are too busy stealing money from the country. Some politicians who want to have a good public image are doing projects and they implement the laws which are not suitable for the Moros and Lumads. Politicians kept promising them a better life but never make any improvements for them. It can be concluded that our government does not really mind them and take the people’s needs quite seriously. They can’t even solve the problems in the major cities, how
could they attend to the problems in areas where they don’t even dare to go except before and during election time?

Salima S. Saway (Bukidnon):

As of now I can’t explain the idea that comes into my mind about conflict. I can only say that some people are demanding for the fulfillment of the promises given by some government officials, that they be given support for the enhancement and betterment of their cultural and traditional aspirations, that they would be treated as equal citizens of the country. But instead, these people were treated like animals, some were even brutally killed by the military. So, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front got mad and fought back. And also like us, the Talaandig tribe in the Province of Bukidnon, we feel that our traditional and cultural beliefs are not respected. Our ancestral lands were taken away from us particularly the Mt. Kitanglad. Mt. Kitanglad is the land where our forefathers lived but the government has proclaimed it as a natural park of the Philippines. And that was not fair to us!

Marion B. Guerrero (Basilan):

For years, ethnic minorities have been yearning for social justice and for equality to end discrimination and poverty. Muslims and Lumads, and other ethnic minorities as well, have always been the victims of this inhuman policy of the government where they are not properly represented. To make things worse, discrimination by their own fellow countrymen adds to their burden. These burdens spawned unrelenting rage and anger that led to violence, armed violence. Thus, conflicts burst before our very eyes.

Nahannie D. Kamensa (Cotabato City):

As mentioned, Mindanao is a multi-racial community. Lumad, Muslims or Moros and Christians are the major groups. Within these groups are subdivisions which have their own conflicts among themselves. This resulted to tribalism and discrimination. One group does not want the other group to be successful. Instead of helping each other, “crab mentality” becomes evident. Pulling down each other leads to conflict of interests which made the situation worse.

Mark Conrad R. Ravanzo (Basilan):

The present conflict in Southern Philippines has something to do with the different kinds of tribes we have, their culture and religion and their ideologies. From my perspective as a Christian, let me cite instances why conflicts in Southern Philippines cannot be solved. First, both Muslims and Christians follow the teachings of their respective religions. I am a Christian and I follow the teachings of Christ. Muslims do not believe in what the Christians do. Second, the customs and traditions of Muslims are different from those of the Christians. Third, vested interests, especially among the elite group. The rich and the famous become powerful and can easily influence people in the government. The poor become the victims of a system created by the powerful. In the process, there is loss of hope, loss of dignity, absence of a good life and finally conflicts set in.

Amor Jade A. Miguel (Basilan):
The different tribes living in Mindanao may have created problems which started these conflicts today. Followers of politicians faithfully express their support no matter how corrupt these politicians have become. These politicians become our local officials but they do not seem to think anymore about the future of their own people and community. They keep on practicing graft and corrupt practices and maintain their goons, guns and gold by whatever means for them to enjoy the leadership and management of the affairs of the local government. The educational system does not have the technical know-how and machineries to help enhance the knowledge and skills of the school children in both the elementary and secondary levels. Poverty is also a big factor to consider since this lead to criminal acts like drug addiction, rape, stealing and even killing for the sake of survival. Finally, the absence of good moral values of people in all levels and the non-commitment of our government officials to improve the quality of life of the citizens.

Fermina Y. Omar (Jolo, Sulu):

I thought that the creation of Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) would be the solution to the long years of suffering of the Moro people. But I was wrong. Some of our leaders promised us good life but those promises are empty, maybe because Mindanao is the land of promise and our leaders keep on promising without making them into reality. Economic problem is also one of the causes of the absence of peace because people are very greedy when it comes to money, the rich becomes richer and poor becomes poorer. Those who have the power and the authority usually control everything in their own hands. Others are busy doing corrupt activities and they are never satisfied with the wealth they already have and instead want to have more. Mindanao is rich in mineral resources but its economy is almost dying as compared to Luzon and Visayas where people are enjoying economic opportunities brought about by stable peace and order conditions. Some politicians run only for the wealth they could get from holding positions they get from the elections but they don’t care about the progress of our land. This is because they lack faith in God; they are just Muslims in names but not in deeds. Islam means Peace, but where is Peace in Mindanao? This is the time to seek for true leaders, leaders who are God-fearing and dedicated to his fellowmen for the development of Mindanao. Why does the government spend billions of pesos for the weapons used in the unending encounters with the rebel groups? Why can’t the government spend those billions for the development of Mindanao? The people want to be independent, to govern their own affairs, but the government objects to this demand. Why? These are puzzles that need answers.

Jeffrey S. Aliudin (Cotabato City):

Peace! Peace! We all want peace, don’t we? But there is no real peace. Instead, there has always been conflict. What actions can we take in the name of peace? Can developed countries share their wealth and make a special effort to help develop some areas in poor countries like the Philippines? The people in Southern Philippines are suffering in poverty because of political divisions and religious differences as well as misunderstanding between the government panel and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). These problems have now erupted into violent conflicts. Indeed, it is in achieving lasting peace which has made the least progress.

Ambayanan B. Manding (Marawi City):
The Maranaos and Maguindanaos are known to be brave and strong fighters. Some of them organized groups now known as Abu Sayyaf, Moro National Liberation Front, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to seek for independence from the Philippine Republic. These fearless groups are one of the government’s major problems. They are the main reason why we have gun battles, ambushes and murders here in Mindanao. Another reason of conflict in Mindanao are the pride and principles of different groups of people particularly the Maranaos, Maguindanaos and Tausugs.

Juhairah M. Cadir (Marawi City):
I believe that the conflicts in southern Philippines started from the Administration and the Bangsamoro forces. The Bangsamoro people unceasingly want to fight for the separation of Mindanao from the Philippines. They want to establish their own state, where they can practice their own laws, tradition and way of life. Conflicts affect the livelihood and financial activities of the people. I believe in the saying that understanding begets cooperation, cooperation begets unity and unity begets peace.

Sittie Ayesha M. Dicali (Marawi City):
What are the reasons behind this chaos? This question is a tough one. But I believe that religious beliefs and political orientations of the people have contributed to it. The Moslems have sown hatred towards their Christian brothers and the Christians also planted grudges towards their Moslem brothers.

Wilric S. Asuncion (Zamboanga City):
The present conflicts in the Southern part of the Philippines are not about cultural differences but obviously about the blood-sucking self interest of some leaders. They want to have their own government and sovereignty in Mindanao and would like to rule the land even through violence.

Johayrah R. Mindalano (Marawi City):
There exists a big gap of differences and misunderstanding between the Muslims and the Christians living in one place. From the very start, they had been competing to be more superior over the other. Christians would say that Muslims are terrorists and that they had been the victims of such ruthlessness. Sad to say, these conflicts have immensely wasted the lives of many people.

Fatimah Sheridana L. Kadil (Bongao, Tawi-tawi):
Some people say that the problem is political! However, according to some community elders, the conflict is deeply rooted on ethnic and religious differences. Such problems are magnified by the present socio-political, economic and cultural inequalities in our lives.

Joanna Loren J. Ochia (Maguindanao):
Betrayal begot the Muslim and Mindanao problems. Betrayal of trust, of truth, and of justice. People so trusting left abandoned, truth distorted; justice, mocked. Muslims and Christians, both players in the Mindanao conflict, are betrayed. Once one people, fate divided them,
alienated them and pitted one against the other. Much as they liked to understand each other, prejudices and biases have prevented this. Suspicions supplanted good intentions. Two people centuries apart needed time and special efforts to bridge the socio-cultural and economic gaps between them. The Muslim problem is socio-economic and political in nature. It has to do with socio-economic disparities between Muslims and Christians in their social and political life as a people; the socio-political struggles of the Muslims for identity, freedom, justice and prosperity; and the Muslim alienation.

What do the youth say about how these things are affecting people’s lives in the southern Philippines?

Henry F. Segovia (Zamboanga City):
Violence had erupted, lives lost and the dreams of several people were shattered. Thousands of innocent residents were forced to flee their homes for fear of being hurt, and several of them are now suffering from hunger and fear.

Cecilia Alexandra Niza (Cagayan de Oro City):
War spells chaos, disunity, and turmoil – the words that exactly describe what is happening in Southern Mindanao. The ongoing armed conflict is threatening thousands of lives especially the civilians. Young adolescents are being dragged into the scene with most of them forced either to become a rebel or a government soldier. Women experience tremendous losses of their husband, their brothers, and their sons. Children are left to grow without a father. And worse, all these scar the hearts of people making them live with hatred and revenge. And the ones greatly affected by all these atrocities are the youth – the hope of our nation. They are the ones who would suffer all the consequences their elders have done. Their elders, on the other hand, claim that they are fighting for their children’s future when that future is nothing but ashes and dust. I see those youths on television, the Muslims especially, they cried saying they want the war to stop, they want to lead normal lives, and they want to study. I pity their situation but I think what they really need from us is our understanding, our love, and our respect.

Johairah M. Cadir (Marawi City):
These conflicts had created a lot of problems which doesn’t only affect Mindanao but also the whole Philippines. It affects the country specially its economy. It has also affected our relationship with other countries. Some countries do not allow their citizens to come to the Philippines because of the peace and order situation. They call our country a “battlefield”.

Nahannie D. Kamensa (Cotabato City):
This situation affects the development in the sense that people are now afraid to live at their own place. People are evacuating from their own lands. The fighting of government forces and the rebels, make the civilians the usual victims. Because of this situation Mindanao is experiencing economic crises. Investors are afraid to invest in any business here in Mindanao because they do not see any assurance that their business will be secured from lawless elements. The beautiful sceneries cannot generate any income because tourists would prefer
places in nearby countries like, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore where they can spend their time and money with peace of mind. Jobless people are growing in number because of limited opportunities in the area.

**Fermina Y. Omar (Jolo, Sulu):**

The existing conflicts between the government and the Moro rebels, the military operations in the province, the bomb threats and explosions destruct people from living normal lives. People are always evacuating to other places far from their homes, migrating and even living in utter poverty. These misguided rebels do not even think of our future, they are not aware what will happen to their victims. They don’t even think that in war, there is no winner but only losers and victims. Those affected most are the people living in peace in rural areas, earning a living, cultivating their lands and raising animals.

**Johayrah R. Mindalano (Marawi City):**

Mindanao -- the land of conflict, the home of the brave and the fighters, the battlefield of the MILF and the government soldiers. Aren’t we tired of fighting one another? Our land is already in great chaos. The economy is not that effective, innocent people are suffering, and the image of the Filipino most especially the Muslims have been stained with biases and prejudices.

**Ambayanan B. Manding (Marawi City):**

Because of fighting for their belief they haven’t noticed the effects and the results of war. Hundreds of innocent lives were lost. A number of churches, mosques, buildings and bridges in some places like Zamboanga, Cotabato, Davao and Pikit were burned which all the more created a big gap between Christians and Muslims. Crimes, death rate and poverty have gone up because of selfishness and strong desire for political power and popularity of some government officials. If no changes can be done, Mindanao will be known as the conflict capital of the Philippines. Moreover, our country will suffer economic crisis due to these unresolved problems in Mindanao.

**Jamaleah L. Benito (Marawi City):**

The Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the most popular terrorist groups in the Philippines, did immoral acts which tarnish the image of Islam. They said that they are doing this for the sake of Islam but what they have done only worsened the situation. It has given Islam a very bad image abroad.

**Fatimah Sheridana L. Kadil (Bongao, Tawi-Tawi):**

This contemporary conflict is causing several millions of damages to properties and the loss of thousands of precious lives. Innocent civilians – Muslims, Christians, and Lumads alike – are the ultimate victims of this problem. The Muslim insurgency, no matter how noble their cause maybe, has frozen southern Philippines and its people into the dark ages of history. It is now time to unfreeze this situation and make the region live its name as the “Land of Promises”.

66
Sittie Ayeesha M. Dicali (Marawi City):

In my own point of view, the conflict here in Southern Philippines is a burden of the whole country and it needs urgent solution. The wars nearly stopped all economic activities in Mindanao. In the process, the whole nation is affected. This is not a problem of Mindanao inhabitants alone. This is a problem of the whole country. The Cebuanos in the Visayas and the Tagalogs in Luzon will consequently feel its effects even if they have not witnessed the terror of endless battles. They will feel the waves of the aftershock in the form of economic depression and instability.

Cecilia Alexandra S. Niza (Cagayan de Oro City):

Now, where does that leave us? Definitely nowhere between the win-win situation but in the lose-lose situation instead. Why? Because war provokes greed instead of generosity; it creates discrimination instead of equality; it promotes inequity instead of justice; it manifests violence instead of caring and; it wreaks havoc instead of reaping love and understanding.

Mark Kenny S. Macrohon (Zamboanga City):

The Filipino youth can not help wondering what went wrong in Mindanao. The problems of massive corruption, divided people and poor development leave Mindanao behind other parts of the Philippines. Moreover, there exists some cultural differences among the inhabitants; and perhaps because of this, the hope of a tranquil, harmonious and more productive living continues to be obscured. However, amidst the struggles and pessimism, the determination of some inspiring people who believe in the capability of the Mindanaoans towards change cannot be ignored.

Joanna Loren J. Ochia (Maguindanao):

At present, the Muslim problem is clearly evident by contrasting the lifestyle of Muslims and the Christians in neighboring communities. Economically, the Christian community is more progressive; socially, the Christians are more advanced. The problem now is how to enlighten the other and eventually remove the disparities. To do this, it is important that we get into the heart of the problem. Another problem that usually comes from poverty and poor education are poor health and sanitation in their homes and in their community. This is true to Christians and Muslims or those in highland communities in similar social situations. Unfortunately, more Muslim than Christian communities in Mindanao are suffering from this social disparity and it is a fact. In the case of Mindanao problem, it is complicated with socio-economic disparity between Muslim and Christian communities. This disparity is blamed on the Christians and the national government. The conflicts are blamed between contemporary realities on one hand and, on the other, the demands of the Muslims for self governance and their aspiration to be free, to preserve their socio-cultural religious identity and their heritage.

Henry F. Segovia (Zamboanga City):

It really doesn’t matter if these people are Muslims or Christians, because the bottom line is that these people have nothing to do with this war and therefore they should be spared. The government may not realize this, but it is not the rebels who are suffering from this war – it is
the people of Mindanao who are really suffering. Haven’t we learned anything at all from this conflict?

**Mary Rose Jean Andrada (Zamboanga City):**

We are saddled with so many questions about our history, and we wonder why we do not dare ask them; instead, we keep them to ourselves. That is why we never understand each other. That is why until now we are not educated about ourselves and what it means to be a true Filipino. I feel strongly about these issues. And now that I am given the chance to ask questions and express my opinions I wish that I be given the chance to personally seek the answers.

**What do the youth say about what should be done for peace to prevail in Mindanao?**

**Cecilia Alexandra S. Niza (Cagayan de Oro City):**

There is no better way to alleviate the worsening condition in Mindanao but to dig deeper into the core of the issues. First, we have to understand why these things are happening and then we have to start accepting each other’s differences as this may be the only way to end the hostilities. We put aside our personal agenda hidden behind smiles and start thinking of the others. After that, the rest would just follow and before you know it, we have completely accepted each other’s diverse culture. The youth now can play a big role in making Mindanao vision for peace a reality. Being able to comprehend all these adversities and peace-destructing situation will help make a change for the betterment of our society. The politicians should build extra classrooms for the education of the youth instead of misspending the money of the government and using it for themselves. Whether they like it or not, the youth will be the next generation to run our nation and if the youth is not trained to be good leaders, this problem in Mindanao will remain unsolved and would even worsen. Education is the way. With wide knowledge and understanding it would be easier for everyone to accept each other’s differences. Then we would not have hard time promoting peace and together start building a progressive Mindanao.

**Farrell Hazsan E. Usman (Cotabato City):**

Maybe, in order to resolve these problems that greatly affect both the innocent people and the economy, people must learn to understand that they must all cooperate in working for the attainment of peace and to forget their own selfish desires.

**Menard Pete Dacono (Davao City):**

Peace can start within us. Peace can start from the youth. We should start teaching the children the right values. We should not let them be influenced by the negative things happening in our society. We should be more responsive to the country’s call for peace.

**Mark Kenny S. Macrohon (Zamboanga City):**

The participation of all Filipinos is just as important as the initiative and sincerity of the Mindanaoans. Furthermore, there is a demand for fresh, vibrant and timely ideas in order to
achieve peace in Mindanao. This may come from no less than the youth. The modern youth is filled with new ideas. However, there should be a venue where these ideas could be expressed. They have witnessed all events which took place in their native land. Youth look at Mindanao problems from a vantage point that is different from the view point of the adults; and probably, the youth do not have vested interests which might prevent the desire for change. The modern Filipino youth is liberal with new principles which Mindanao needs for a better future. The youth, inspired by their ideas for a better life for the people, is the hope of Mindanao.

Rainier Gem A. Machitar (Cotabato City):

There is still hope and it lies in the citizens of Mindanao. If we should only practice respect and love for others in spite of our differences, it would not be difficult for us to attain peace. If justice prevails and equality reigns, there is no doubt we can have a productive and harmonious life. The key to success is in our hands. The current peace problem in Mindanao is making life dangerous for people who seek change. Leaders should do something about it. The people themselves should initiate change for the better. Mindanao is such a nice place to go to waste. If this situation will not be resolved, what will happen to the people of Mindanao?

Fatimah Sheridanah L. Kadil (Bongao, Tawi-Tawi):

To end this conflict, peaceful negotiation is the only right course to take. Sincere cooperation and understanding is vital to a lasting resolution of such problem. Every civilized individual and society must not rest until the conflict in southern Philippines is finally solved. Let the tragedy end and let development and prosperity begin in the spirit of freedom, understanding, unity and co-existence under one nation!

Johayrah R. Mindalano (Marawi City):

At this point, we should not use our pride or else we will all certainly fail in this fight. Let us open our eyes to the reality, the calamities happening in our country and the sufferings of the people because of these conflicts. Imagine how much money the government have spent for this war which should had been spent for the welfare of the people. To attain peace, there should be mutual respect between Muslims and Christians as Filipinos. Christians should stop making generalizations about the Muslims. They should remember that the true Muslims are those who follow the five pillars of Islam. We should not lose hope because it’s not yet too late to solve this problem. If we just respect, love, care, and help one another, we will be united… Inshaallah. Peace will be achieved and war will be terminated. But if we only sit down and do nothing, we’ll suffer more than we could ever imagine and we’ll have nothing good to offer to the subsequent generation.

Sittie Ayeesha M. Dicali (Marawi City):

I believe this clash must be stopped. The sick needs medicine and their pain, alleviated. The government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) must destroy the walls of misunderstanding and mistrust. They must open the doors of communication and understanding especially when they’re engaged in peace talks. Let not politics interfere in the
negotiation. The whole nation must move now to heal its wounds because it will take a long time to heal by itself. Then, we can achieve peace and prosperity.

**Juhairah M. Cadir (Marawi City):**

I can not see any positive development in the negotiations between the government and the Bangsamoro. I don’t think that the solution to these conflicts is giving in to their demands. Why don’t we just help the government to improve and develop our respective communities? I think we should all unite and be one. We are divided by waters so let us not allow religions, beliefs, traditions and politics totally divide us further.

**Jamaleah L. Benito (Marawi City):**

I am appealing to our Christian brothers and sisters, please do not be carried away with what these terrorists are doing. They are not true Muslims because if they are then they would not be doing these acts. Please do not make generalizations about us. Muslim brothers, please do not do anything which can alter the image of Islam as a whole. Always remember that by being good, God is always with us.

**Fermina Y. Omar (Jolo, Sulu):**

If we are just willing to admit our mistakes and be ready to unite with our fellow Muslims, there’ll be no conflict, then peace shall prevail!

**Fahad A. Pimping (Marawi City):**

It is also important that history books be rewritten to erase the distorted picture of Muslims as juramentados and pirates. What should be written are things which could foster better relationships between Christians and Muslims. Moreover, in areas where there is conflict, the youth can play a very important role if given the chance. They should not remain silent, dumb, inactive, disunited and uncooperative in facing these problems. Thus, inter-ethnic forum and cooperation will make a difference in understanding each other even if we differ in culture and history. Inter-ethnic dialogue serves as a good start for a young peace-process to grow, to mature and to be fruitful.

**Marion B. Guerrero (Basilan):**

Since independence, the government poured billions of funds to push economic plans to end the conflict, unfortunately corruption ate it away. The military made the situation more fragile. Amidst the turmoil, a bright unorthodox method was launched: “Inter-faith and ethnic dialogue”. A dialogue is the most appropriate forum to deliver unheard pleas and to find a peaceful solution to end this conflict. This is the forum in which views from both sides are heard and fully considered for the sake of peace.

**Salima S. Saway (Bukidnon):**

I hope that our government will try to show its concern for the indigenous peoples and that our traditional cultures be given due respect and recognition. We also want to be given equal services just like other citizens of this country.
Carell Ryza E. Nartatez (Cotabato City):

It is high time that the government revise its policies towards the native inhabitants of Southern Philippines and address the root causes of the problem so that peace and development in the region can be finally attained. Then we can look forward to a nation where there is solidarity, harmony, equality and respect for human rights and the dignity of every citizen.

Jeffrey S. Aliudin (Cotabato City):

What we can do now is to reconcile different ethnic groups and be united with a common goal to attain peace. When will we ever learn to accept our differences? As the protest song puts it, the answer is still blowing in the wind.

Joanna Loren J. Ochia (Maguindanao):

The gap is not unbridgeable. Let us try to understand the main root of the problem. Apply the proper solution. Stop the betrayal. Present realities show that a bridge can be built for mutual understanding. Finding solutions to the Muslim and Mindanao problems has been frustrating. Solution begets new problems. As a high school student, it is already very clear to me that engaging in bloody war and sacrificing lives are not the answers to anyone’s adversities. The solution can be found in our lifetime. Despite the intensifying conflict, positive signs are there. So let’s just continue these peace efforts so that solutions can evolve and it’s already our responsibility to nurture its growth and development.

Mary Rose Jean Andrada (Zamboanga City):

The current situation in Southern Philippines will never be solved unless someone dares to stand and put some sense into our people’s psyche. Someone has to send the message that our country needs to be helped. This is the time when the Philippines needs its people most. In the end, all boils down to us. The welfare of this nation rests in its people’s hands. It is up to us now to take the move. We should not fear today’s evil for it shall pass, but rather, we should fear the day when our children would wake up in a world where unity is impossible and freedom non-existent. For it is only then when we all strive to be ONE Filipino people can we be really united. We shall only gain peace when we once again become ONE in the service of God and country.

Mark Kenny S. Macrohon (Zamboanga City):

The people of Mindanao should live in unity with the mutual interest of striving for the best. We treasure our diverse religious convictions and various cultural traditions, but we have one common denominator - we are Mindanaoans and we are Filipinos. The youth from different parts of Mindanao must come together to share their different point of views. They have to investigate and understand the root causes of the conflict. Youth empowerment can be achieved with ideas from fellow youth and from other people who are leaders in advancing the cause for national unity. We must have optimism, strength and faith in ourselves because there is still hope for peace in southern Philippines. The youth are the hope. If the youth possess these qualities, they must be given the opportunity to voice out what they think and believe are best for Mindanao. They must be able to put their ideas into action. The youth
comprise the largest group of people in Mindanao as well as in the Philippines. If they work together, Mindanao will grow. Mindanao will be a sanctuary for the most colorful groups of people in the Philippines living in peace and prosperity.

Wilric C. Asuncion (Zamboanga City):

I suggest that we set aside all our grievances and self interests because if we don’t, we cannot have success in the attainment of peace. We should be committed and unselfish. Hope lies in the hands of those who have conviction and ideals. We should strongly believe that this country is not hopeless. We should believe that Filipinos can stand together as brothers. The psalmist said. “Let us then be up and doing, with a heart for any faith still achieving, still pursuing, learn to labor and to wait.” It means that if we want peace, let us start peace in ourselves, and let us learn to wait, because if we will help ourselves, God will also help us.

Henry F. Segovia (Zamboanga City):

Peace in Mindanao is an elusive concept, but strides can be made, one-step at a time. I hope to initiate change, it can be small in magnitude, but change leads to revolutions, and this is where my peace begins.
Appendix B: Selected Speeches

Promise
By Henry Segovia
Unity in Diversity Lunch, April 21, 2004

"Who are the Americans, these new men”, asked one of the thousands who moved to North America in the 18th century. “He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced. Here, individuals of different origin are melted in to a new race of men.

It has always amazed me how a nation of such diversity is glued by a politics of participation based on the belief that to be legitimate and lasting, a government had to derive its power from the people. This is an ideal that is yet to be accomplished in my country, the Philippines. Today, the Filipino people are struggling for that ideal.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe that it is possible to have unity in diversity. If not, I would not have joined this Philippine ACCESS Exchange Program. In the world where we are living today and it is rightly called “the Global Village”, having unity without diversity would seem absurd.

But, I also know that there are too many conflicts throughout that continuously satisfy us. The revival of historical grudges in the Balkans, the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the daily violence in Israel and troubles in Indonesia. My country is not indifferent to these situations: until now, we are struggling to unite a Mindanao torn apart by religious divide, political neglect and ethnic conflicts.

These issues and more convinced me that I have to do something – both as an individual and as a member of the community.

Some of my questions have been answered, most are to be realized.

My 21 days of stay in the US has helped me to come up with an answer to these conflicts – and that is, intolerance. Intolerance ignited most wars, fuelled religious persecution and violent ideological confrontations.

Unity in diversity, for me, means enhancing common values that emphasize interdependence. Together, tolerance can be taught, can be learned, can be integrated.

There is so much job to be done in building a better Mindanao _ and the 33 of us from the Philippine ACCESS Exchange Program are willing to take the challenge.

Nine days from now, we will have to say goodbye to America.

For 21 days, I have experienced how it is to live in pursuit of liberty and happiness. For 21 days, it was entirely a different culture from mine – big hamburgers, cereals for breakfast, changing weather. For 21 days, the Filipino youths had a voice, a message and we were heard, because you listened to us. And I am never, ever the same again.

Together, we will fulfill the promise of great Mindanao.

There is hope, so believe in us. We have a vision, so trust us.
The Journey Back Home
By Henry Segovia
Graduation Ceremony, April 28, 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen:

A 5-year old boy, after hours of peddling cigarettes, which is common in the Philippines, hesitantly asked 50 cents from her old mother – barely 1 percent of a dollar. The busy street of down Zamboanga – the city where I come from – had been a home to these two impoverished people. In the cold, bare floor they would rest every night not even minding the passersby. The streets had been their world, the only place they could afford to live. But, on that fateful night of October 11, 2001, a bomb exploded in an open public restaurant where the old mother and her son would do their trade. All the little boy wanted was to buy iced water because he was so thirsty, so he went inside that public restaurant…but he never went out alive again. Her mother, hearing the loud explosion, powerless in her desire to help the child, could do nothing but grieve in pain. Because on that night, she had lost her only possession, her life, her happiness, her son. She is old and all alone.

Because the Abu Sayyaf did it! Because some MILF or MNLF group were, perhaps, behind it. Because the Muslims wanted it.

And some Christian and Muslim fundamentalists would not rest until the other is diminished…until the last breath of all religious adherents of a particular faith are taken away…until they shall feel God’s favor on them by executing horrible attacks to those who are indifferent to their plight.

The next morning, I had to beg my parents not to go to work. I was scared because just the thought of the rebels executing another bomb plot is unbearable. But, they wouldn’t listen because they had to work to sustain us. Accordingly, it had to be business as usual. Everyday, the same amount of fear and insecurity would sweep me. Everyday, there is no peace of mind.

In some areas, guns and bombs form an exploding roar of power and might threatening the inhabitants of its presence, its force, its desire to conquer. But within its evil desires, within its might and within its terrifying threats, peace is not to be found.

And this is the reason why I joined this Philippine ACCESS Exchange Program – that I shall, that we shall no longer sit immobile in front of our televisions when a handful of power thirsty vultures spreads death in the name of religion….that I, along with my peers, must take my backpack with courage, wisdom and commitment in it and trail a journey towards peace.

To paraphrase the words of the great Chinese sage, Lao Tze: the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And the people behind this Philippine ACCESS Exchange Program have all taken that single step now.

A scarred hand is reaching out, palm facing forward. It is the hand of those who have sacrificed their lives so that peace can be rooted deeply in the rich soil of commitment. Someday, I know, peace will flow like a never ending stream of harmony throughout our islands. Someday, peace will have a place in the heart of every Mindanaon.

To all those who have been a part of this great dream, Thank You Very Much.

I also would like to remember our families in the Philippines. They were brave enough to let go of us for a month. Days from now, we will be together again. Days from now, we are back from where we came from.

But before we leave, our sincerest appreciation to all our foster families. Thank you for welcoming us to your homes.
Ladies and Gentlemen, today we finally break our silence.
And to all those who have died, who have laid their lives as a ransom for peace in Mindanao, I dedicate my journey, our journey.

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Distinguished guests…Provost Gary Gersholdt, Provost Ivan Legg, Dr Thecla Cooler, Michelle Bringas, Dr. Susan Russell, Dr. Nagasura Madale, Dr. Noemi Medina, Dr Lina Ong, my colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good afternoon!

It started with a dream. A dream that has long been waiting for someone to fulfill and sustain. And now the dream is a reality. We are here, twenty six young Filipinos willing to change lives and redefine the future of peace. Peace seems like an illusive dream for us. People, for some reasons, build walls instead of breaking barriers and bridging the gap.

Looking back to our history, as I have learned is an essential part of understanding the root causes of conflict and affecting change by destroying our biases and prejudices. That we not only respect the differences of others but rather celebrate them as it is what makes this world a haven of unique individuals.

I believe that the purpose of these differences is not for us to start resisting and closing our minds to others. This is essential for all of us to be able to discover and appreciate the beauty of diversity and realize how wonderful we are as one people. If we start believing in the power of peace then there will be no more wars, no more tears shed. We believe that this is just the beginning of our careers as ambassadors of peace and agents of change in Mindanao. If all nations, starting with the youth, take this awesome responsibility then who knows in ten years we will be less discriminating but more accepting of the fact that we all are human beings with equal rights deserving of respect regardless of our faith, race and color.

Paz, Kalilintad, Kaayad hu kaggahinawa, Kalinaw, Kapayaoaan, Peace…They may sound differently but they all mean the same thing. Peace be with us all. Thank you.

Delivered by: Johayrah R. Mindalano
DCFI, Marawi City
Date delivered: April 26, 2004
Chandelier Room
Appendix C: Pledge of Commitment

ACCESS/Philippines Program 2004

Pledge of Commitment

I, ________________________________, a participant of the ACCESS/Philippines Program, having gone through a month-long training for Interethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution at Northern Illinois University, commit myself to:

- Examine my own biases and work to overcome them;
- Set a positive example for my family and friends;
- Work for active tolerance and respect in my own community and to continually challenge myself to work for peace, holding to my own identity, culture, and tradition inspired by my own faith in God, and
- Work further to face all these challenges with wisdom and courage.

So help me God.

_________________________________________
Name

_________________________________________
Date
Appendix D: Partner Institutions

Northern Illinois University (NIU), through the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the International Training Office (ITO), entered into a partnership with the Capitol University in Cagayan de Oro, and the International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc. Collectively, these organizations brought critical resources and capacities to the ACCESS-Philippines Project. These partner institutions provided (1) expertise and personal contacts in recruiting and selecting program participants; (2) expertise in organizing and coordinating community youth programs; (3) first-hand knowledge of the ARMM and the Mindanao region; (4) experience in dealing with inter-ethnic issues of cooperation and conflict management.

NIU is a Carnegie-classified Research Extensive university with a century-long reputation for excellence in teaching, discovery and outreach. Chartered in 1895, NIU is a comprehensive teaching and research university with seven degree granting colleges that together offer 51 undergraduate degree programs and 70 graduate degree programs, including Ph.D. programs, doctoral degrees in Education, and the Juris Doctorate. As the suburban Chicago area's premier public university, NIU serves one of the nation's largest and most dynamic regions. More than 24,000 students study here, and nearly 200,000 alumni call NIU their alma mater.

In the fall of 2003, over 1,000 international students representing about 100 countries were enrolled at NIU. To meet the needs of an ever-growing international student body, NIU has employed a significant number of faculty and staff with valuable experience and skills in international training and related fields. Many faculty members are involved in international development activities that include providing consulting services to business, industry, education, and government, as well as providing instruction and training services overseas.

The northern Illinois region includes 80% of the state's population, a significant aggregation of minority and ethnic groups, and a majority of the Illinois community colleges. Like the region, the university is changing rapidly into a highly diverse student body, with 27% of our undergraduates being minority students--mirroring the population base from which most of our students come.

NIU draws upon the extensive human resources and support capabilities of the entire academic community as well as the rich learning resources of the Chicago area in order to create a meaningful learning environment for the participants of its international training programs. The ability to tap these human and physical resources is a critical factor in the success of its programs. The university campus is within easy access to major federal regional centers, leading community colleges, political institutions and multinational companies, which make it possible to develop enriching observational tours and hands-on experiences for participants.

NIU’s international reputation for academic achievement attracts students, researchers, and professors from around the globe. The university provides numerous academic facilities for its students, including a sizeable modern library, computer labs, and a state-of-the-art language laboratory. As a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I
school, NIU also possesses well-maintained recreational facilities, including a modern sports and recreation center, swimming facility, and gymnasium. The 514-acre campus is situated only 60 minutes from the historic landmarks of downtown metropolitan Chicago – the nation’s third largest city.

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at NIU is a federally-funded and internationally renowned undergraduate National Resource Center (www.niu.edu/cseas/). CSEAS draws upon and contributes to the cultural and intellectual richness of the region, which is the center of Illinois’ high technology and agribusiness. As one of only eight U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Centers for Southeast Asian, the CSEAS has the nation’s fifth largest Southeast Asian library collection and 45 faculty and staff that specialize in Southeast Asia. Established in 1963, the Center is responsible for addressing the academic curriculum needs of the university community on Southeast Asia, and developing and administering outreach and research programs concerned with this region of the world. A unique Center resource is SEAsite, an interactive multimedia language training and culture learning Web site that offers instruction in languages not commonly taught in universities and grade schools including Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese, Lao, Tagalog, and Indonesian. Center Associates teach over 65 courses a year that deal with Southeast Asia.

The International Training Office (ITO) at NIU is the international training resource unit of the university and is in charge of administering certificate courses and short-term training programs for international client organizations, both from the government and the private sector for the past 20 years. Through the years, ITO has carved a niche as an enabler and facilitator of change and as an active partner in developing the human resources potential of professionals from the less advanced areas of the world. ITO has enhanced the capacities of public sector, private sector and nongovernmental organizations as well as individuals from many countries in the world, including Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, and Venezuela. For two decades, ITO has been engaged in design and delivery of training programs in a wide variety of fields that are customized to the special requirements of international clients. ITO’s training philosophy emphasizes active learning methodologies to maximize learner participation and promote creative and practical applications. ITO advocates participatory processes in training design and implementation and has remained at the forefront of the learner-centered training approach.

Capitol University (formerly Cagayan Capitol College) in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines, is the youngest university in northern Mindanao. Founded in 1971 by Madame Laureana S. Rosales, Capitol University is a private co-educational institution. With a student enrollment of almost 7,000, the university is considered one of the finest marine science institutions in the Philippines. The university offers a wide range of graduate and undergraduate degree programs including education, engineering (civil, mechanical, electronics, and marine), nursing, commerce, criminology, agricultural technology, physiotherapy, and computer science. Capitol University prides itself in educating the "total person" and raising capable individuals of upright character who will become catalysts for positive social transformation. Capitol University will soon launch a new Ph.D. program in anthropology with a focus on Muslim-Christian integration, and peace studies. This area of specialization is one of eleven priorities in the university’s five-year academic agenda.
The International Visitors Program-Philippines Alumni Foundation, Inc. or IVP-Phils. was born out of a desire to come together in solidarity by former Filipino participants of the International Visitor Program (IVP) of the U.S. State Department. With the support and encouragement of the U.S. Embassy in Manila, the organization composed of IVP participants dating back to the early 1960s was created four years ago with the objective of being a prime mover of volunteerism in the Philippines. IVP-Phils. is a diverse network of professionals composed of senators, justices, cabinet members, university presidents, professors, teachers, private voluntary organization directors, cultural experts, clerics and a lot more and thus covers almost all sectors of Philippine society. It has been involved in implementing projects on corporate governance and social responsibility, teacher-empowerment and enhancing their proficiency in English and other skills, peace, human rights and development, among others. One of its projects involves training and mobilizing the youth in all regions of Mindanao to do their share in working for peace in Mindanao.