

Conflicts in the Asia Pacific and Economic Impediments to Peace

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I. Introduction

The Asia Pacific region is a hotbed of conflicts.

Countries in the region have had a long history of being colonized by the more powerful nations of the West. Some of the countries were even under colonial rule for hundreds of years.

Struggles for national freedom started to spring up. Towards the period leading to the Second World War and even afterwards, wars for liberation – with some said to have been by the October Revolution in Russia and Chinese Revolution – intensified and many also achieved their desired end of overthrowing colonial rule.

However, since the turn of the last century, the face of old-style colonialism slowly started to change. Empire-building by powerful countries has increased in intensity though the form may have changed after direct colonialism met the resistance of people's movements against colonial rule.

National liberation movements, anti-feudal struggles, armed struggle to overthrow dictators and repressive governments – conflicts are endless in many countries. Lasting peace is still a sought-for dream for many people.

II. Conflict situation in Asia Pacific

There are many particular conflicts in the region. It is safe to say though that many of the major ones can be classified according to the problem they are working on to resolve.

The more popular ones are the "people's war" by communist parties and their armed organizations like in the Philippines, Nepal and India. These struggles are waged against what is perceived as control of foreign powers over their lands and resources, dictates of more powerful countries to their policies, and the deprivation of basic rights of the people.

The national democratic revolution being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines, New People's Army and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines is considered as one of the longest-running in the region. It has gone through various changes in the government including more than a decade of Martial Law.

Meanwhile, before the recent elections, the one in Nepal led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has hit the headlines even of the international media. The upsurge of their struggle was unprecedented that it has changed the political landscape of Nepal.

In the elections for an assembly that will eventually come out with a new constitution in Nepal that would eradicate the monarchy, the CPN (Maoist) has gained majority of the seats. The world now watches what changes await the people of Nepal with this new

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condition as well as what reaction such will illicit from the more powerful neighbors of Nepal like India and China, and even the United States as well as from the former ruling parties.

There are also struggles being waged in some countries that are against national oppression. An example of this is the armed struggle of the Moros in Mindanao, south of the Philippines. The Moros have long been fighting for self-determination as a people. Before, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) has a strong foothold in the said island. More than a decade ago, it forged a peace agreement with the national government and has since then been absorbed by the system.

However, until the present, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) pursues the cause for self-determination. Despite the massive outpouring of military personnel in the island – that now includes US soldiers who are there under the guise of joint RP-US military exercises – the MILF's bases in Mindanao remain impregnable.

The same struggle, in various degrees, is also waged by ethnic minority groups in Burma. Some of the most brutal tactics of suppression by the ruling military junta have been directed to ethnic groups in different regions.

The people's struggle in Burma, however, is more known for its aim of overthrowing the junta and instituting a civilian government. In the said democratic movement, thousands of activists have been exiled while still more have been killed, imprisoned, torture and disappeared. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese have been forced to flee.

These are just some of the conflicts that people of the region are in the middle of.

III. Conflict and the War on Terror

To speak of peace in the region will not be complete if one doesn't take into account the situation of conflict in relation to the current global war on terror. Conflict situation intensified in the region with the launch of the said war led by the United States.

Despite having been discredited for so long as just a mere way of the American empire to expand its foothold in the region – with the occupation of Afghanistan and then of Iraq – and cornering the oil market in the world.

“The 9/11 bombings instantly reversed the disposition of the US, particularly the temper of bipartisan consensus, as the Bush regime conjured and hyped the "global terrorist" menace and persuaded the American public. The US Congress was swayed to support a worldwide, borderless, permanent and preemptive "war against terrorism". The initial targets of invasion and occupation would provide the US with access to and control of strategic resources, vital supply lines and strategic forward positions for military aggression.” *(Prof. Jose Ma. Sison, Speech on Conference on US Militarism and War on Terror in the Asia Pacific Region)*

Afghanistan and Iraq are two countries which are of strategic importance to the US if it is to maintain its position in the world. The US has long coveted Afghanistan for access to and control of the rich sources of oil and natural gas reserves in the Caspian region and Central Asia and for securing a foothold on the western flank of China. It has even more coveted Iraq for its huge oil reserves next only to Saudi Arabia, which has the largest but of a quality inferior to Iraqi oil. Iraq has the added advantage of being centrally located, suitable for building US military bases and controlling the sources of oil in the Middle East.

The US occupation has spurred the people of Iraq to take up arms against their aggressors. The desperation of the US government to keep a stranglehold over Iraq has resulted to a

war that probably has one of the most casualties in terms of people's lives and the resultant impact of the over the top war spending that has made American people's lives miserable.

After its occupation of Iraq, the US agenda has become even clearer – that is to assert its military might in the world and put the recalcitrant states in line. Immediately after declaring the global war on terror, it has even declared Southeast Asia as the second front of its own brand of war of liberation.

The global war on terror has made conflict situations in the region even worse. Its push to brand groups and individuals as “terrorists” has actually resulted to grave human rights abuses in many countries. It has also clamped down on many legitimate rights of the people such as the right to organize, the right of workers to stage strikes, the right to protest, and even the right to revolt against an oppressive regime.

As the United States and its major allies such as the UK and Australia, advance the cause of its war on terror, it further plunges weaker countries in even deeper crisis.

IV. Economic Impediments to Peace

Before there was conflict, there was poverty. Before there was war, there was oppression.

We cannot discount the fact that the conflicts that arose and are ongoing in different countries in the region all boil down to or, at the very least, have, economic dimensions.

Colonialism and neocolonialism were primarily pushed by economic desires to gain additional territories for more markets, more sources of raw materials to keep industries going and more sources of cheap labor.

Such desires of the superpower countries have further worsened the economic inequality in the world.

The wealthiest 20% of the world's population are in the richest countries, and the poorest 20% are in the third world countries. The income of the former was 30 times larger than that of the latter in 1960. Then it became 74 times larger in 1995. Today, the overwhelming majority of the people live on less than two dollars a day and are concentrated in the third world. In 1973, the third world debt was only US\$130 billion. In 1982, it jumped to US\$612 billion. In 2006, it further leaped to US\$3.2 trillion.

This general condition is also evident on countries with conflict situation.

Despite the touted economic growth promoted by the government of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, government statistics themselves speak of the rising disparity among the populace. Majority of Filipinos did not enjoy the benefits of the said growth. And what growth there was did not result in an improvement in income inequality. According to the 2006 Family Income and Expenditures Survey (FIES), which is used to compute poverty, the richest 20% of families (accounting for some 3.5 million families) account for 52.8% of total family income. Further, the income of the richest 10% was nineteen times that of the poorest 10 percent. (http://info.ibon.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=260&Itemid=50)

[The wage situation in the Philippines is not helped by the current government's wage policy. President Arroyo has been an ardent supporter of neoliberal globalization even before she assumed presidency. Thus, ever since she became president, no wage increase has been implemented in the minimum wage despite the fact that the current wage level cannot shoulder the results of inflation anymore.](#)

Meanwhile in Nepal, a study of the Asian Development Bank of Inequality in Asia (the gap between the richest 20% of the population and the poorest 20%) using the Gini Coefficient has shown that Nepal has the highest inequality among the so-called developing countries member of the ADB with 47.3.

<http://www.nepalitimes.com/issue/362/StateoftheState/13852>)

The oil price hike in Burma has highlighted the disparity in the nation. The steep fuel price has resulted to the inability, even of former white-collar workers to pay for bus fares from their home to their work. The outpouring of protest by the monks – recognized spiritual leaders of the country – has been widely perceived as a barometer of how desperate the situation is of the Burmese people.

With the sharp increase in fuel prices that triggered hikes in prices of basic commodities. Rice prices doubled almost over night.

Critics blamed the mismanagement of the military junta or the Special Council for Peace and Development and the economic sanctions imposed in Burma for the current economic crisis in the country. Poverty is very much widespread in Burma that more and more children are forced to labor seven times a week earning less than US\$1 a day.

The economic crisis of colonies and semicolonies further perpetuate this inequality. In these trying times, the poverty of the people deepens and their capacity to even survive for a day is rapidly diminished. Such a crisis is evident in the current food problem being experienced by many.

It is ironic that many of the severely affected countries of the food problem are actually those that have historically been agricultural economies and now still relies on agricultural production as the main source of national survival.

The UN World Food Programme estimates that recent price hikes in basic staples have meant that an additional 100 million people can no longer afford to eat adequately.

Food policy experts have blamed neoliberal globalization policies in agriculture as the culprit for the perceived food crisis. It is largely believed that, notwithstanding the doomsday propaganda of food shortage, farmers around the world actually produce more than enough food to feed the world's population as shown by the production of 2.7 billion tons of grains in 2007 or a 4% increase from the previous year.

The problem, they said is that food production doesn't get to all who need it. Giant agro-industrial corporations are the ones making the most profit from the current agricultural trade setup and leave those who actually produce with nothing especially the small farmer.

<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=39>)

According to studies, roughly 70% of all so-called developing countries are net importers of food. Of the estimated 845 million hungry people in the world, 80% are small farmers.

With this problem, even the International Monetary Fund has warned that it can lead to social unrest and even war. The IMF also warned that the rapid slow down of the global economy can lead to a recession this year or the next.

Landlessness, unemployment, unlivable wage and displacement are rampant in underdeveloped and developing countries. In desperation, millions of people from said countries are forced to seek employment in other countries in order to survive.

This forced migration is not resolved and, in fact, is even institutionalized by developing countries to prop up their sagging economies. The enormous profit from migrant workers – global remittance is estimated to be at US\$226 trillion – make it a very lucrative industry for labor-exporting countries that have no strong agricultural base or basic industries to speak of that can compete with existing multinational and transnational corporations.

Aside from its economic returns, forced migration also diffuses the political and social tension that shall naturally come from an economic situation of exploitation and oppression.

The crisis experienced by the underdeveloped and developing countries is part of the global crisis that grips especially the superpower countries. With the said countries steep in problems, it is not surprising that their colonies and semicolonies shall also experience the same, if not in an even worse degree.

The world's superpower is in crisis. Despite its effort to salvage its own economy through neoliberal globalization and the war on terror, the United States is in a situation of unprecedented slump. US' national debt last year reached US\$9.1 trillion while trade deficit was pegged at US\$800 billion.

With such crisis, the US and other countries reeling problems generated by overproduction do their best to transfer their problems to weaker economies trade liberalization, deregulation and privatization – policies that are being pushed by the World Trade Organization or WTO. These policies are the ones behind the liberalization of agriculture and mining laws, like the Philippines Mining Act of 1995, that farmers landless and in force feudal exploitation.

However, with the recent failures of WTO negotiations, rich countries are slowly veering towards bilateral free trade agreements. An example of this is the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement or JPEPA.

The said agreement has been criticized for its unequal trade provisions owing to its non-recognition of the basic differences between that of the Philippines and Japan. It aims to remove agricultural and industrial tariffs between the countries without accounting for the basic differences on the agriculture and industry sectors of the two. It is the fourth economic partnership agreement (EPA) that Japan has signed towards its aim of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia that anti-JPEPA activists said is reminiscent of the former Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that Japan wished to build when during the second world war period.

(http://info.ibon.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=176&Itemid=59)

In recent years, Asian countries have also seen a boom in the establishment of economic free trade zones. Inside such zones, the situation of workers is intolerable. Industries within the zones are notorious for low wages and slave like working conditions. Workers are also not allowed to form unions and their right to protest is stifled with the ban on strikes.

Instead of neoliberal globalization and wars of aggression solving these problems, they even put the world in an even deeper economic, political and social turmoil. It has further pushed the desire for a just and lasting peace even farther out of reach.

V. The Long Way to Peace

The people of Asia Pacific want peace. For decades, and even centuries, wars and conflicts have characterized the landscape of countries in the region.

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In some cases, conflicting parties attempt resolution through peace negotiations. An example of this is the peace talk between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

The said peace negotiation started in the late 80's after the dictatorial rule of former Pres. Ferdinand Marcos. However, after the Corazon Aquino government declared an all-out war against the Communist Left, the talks collapsed.

The counter insurgency program of the Aquino administration victimized thousands of activists and civilians. It has even been noted by many human rights activists that the victims of repression during the same period was even higher than the decade-long martial rule. It included high-profile assassinations of leaders of the progressive movement.

The armed revolution in the Philippines has been in an upsurge since the close of the 20th century despite the continuation and intensification of the all-out war during the successive regimes of Fidel Ramos and Joseph Estrada.

After the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHIHL) – the first substantive agreement as laid down by the Hague Declaration – between former President Estrada and the NDFP, however, the peace negotiations met major bumps with the current government of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Since the GMA government accepted the US' terrorist tagging of the CPP and its refusal to withdraw the label and stop the prosecution of the NDFP's Chief Political Consultant, the peace talks have been stalled.

This problem is further compounded by the human rights record of the GMA administration. Currently, victims of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances that have been attributed to government military personnel – and affirmed by fact-finding missions of different NGOs around the world such as Amnesty International and even of UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary killings Philip Alston – have reached more than 1,100.

No victim has been given justice.

At the core of the peace and conflict resolution issue in the region is the absence of justice. Before the conflict, there is poverty, exploitation and oppression. Historically, the wars and conflicts in the region were driven by economics, in particular, the drive of powerful countries to have their empires in the region at the expense of the people.

Times may have changed. The players may have been replaced. But the essence has remained the same.

Indeed the people of Asia Pacific want peace and are tirelessly working for it. A peace based on justice. A just and lasting peace.