

Terrorism? Or, Terror, therefore ISM?

Josephine O'Connor

Most travellers, given the opportunity to visit the Philippines for a week would not choose to undertake a 'tiki tour' of sites of gross human rights abuses. Most sightseeing groups are not split into five, recommended a location on the basis of its appalling human rights record, and sent there to interview survivors of torture who graphically re-enact the violence that was inflicted upon them. This is not a technique that is used to raise tourist numbers. This is a technique necessitated by outrageous human rights abuse and used by a nation that is desperately trying to raise awareness of its plight.

In August last year, along with three other Aotearoa New Zealanders, I traveled to the Philippines. We joined 100 other delegates from 26 nations as part of an International Solidarity Mission (ISM) that was organised by an alliance of human rights NGOs based in the Philippines. The mission's purpose was simple: to bring to international attention the systematic human rights violations being perpetrated against the people of the Philippines.

The historical record of state violence in the Philippines is widely known but according to human rights advocates, since 2001 the situation has worsened. In the case of the Muslim population in Mindanao, the sinister role of the military has been fully sanctioned, generously resourced and cleverly woven into the international 'War on Terror', a conflict that conveniently fails to acknowledge the complexities of a struggle centuries old.

From a distance, the situation in Mindanao seems relatively easy to comprehend, if you follow mainstream media. According to George W. Bush, the Philippines is the Second Front on the 'War on Terror', and Mindanao is its hub. Al Qaeda operatives are everywhere, Abu Sayyaf recruits, trains and finances its work throughout Mindanao using terrorism as its method, while Jemaah Islamiyah continues its campaign of bloodshed. This simplification denies any agency to the Muslim population who have waged an insurgency against US forces since the island was purchased by the US (from Spain) in 1898.

Since then, any efforts to gain sovereignty on the part of the Moros (the term given by the Spanish colonisers to the Filipino Muslim population, now adopted and worn with pride) have been labelled 'terrorist'. However, since 9/11 and the subsequent declaration of the 'War on Terror', the human rights of Moros have been horribly violated under the pretext of global security.

Draconian provisions not seen since the days of former President Marcos' Martial Law have been re-employed in the Philippines. Some of the common features of these measures – past and present include: arbitrary detention without charge or trial; the criminalisation of communities, organisations and individuals by labelling them as

terrorist; the undermining of due process; and the intensification of all forms of discrimination.

Of the five 'human rights hot spots' that were chosen for the ISM participants to visit, Sulu, in Mindanao, was the most dangerous. Three days before we were set to go, it was cancelled; Sulu was simply too dangerous to ensure the safety of the team. Instead, the ISM was to concentrate on visiting the displaced Moros who reside in Manila as a direct consequence of the struggle in Mindanao.

Moro women and children follow their husbands and fathers imprisoned in Manila's jails; Moro slums inexorably develop nearby. In Baseco, Tondo, near Manila Bay, the mission visited a community of 80,000 people – among them many internally displaced Moros from Cotabato in Mindanao and Basilan in Sulu– who live on top of a garbage dump on reclaimed land. Health conditions are deplorable and social services non-existent. Water contamination is causing severe intestinal and skin disorders and residents are dying of preventable diseases. Earning a pittance, the average family is forced to scavenge through trash in order to survive.

At press conferences we attended, we repeatedly heard the question 'Why doesn't the world know about this? They know about Burma, they know about Tibet, they know about Nepal, but no one seems to care about what happens to the Moros'. The question was rhetorical. It is difficult to get exposure given the circumstances. The media has a short attention span when it comes to covering issues that require detailed, historical analysis. At this point in history, we need to be very wary of the media's interpretation of conflict in the Philippines, especially that relating to the Muslim population, and acknowledge that it is irresponsible to take the label 'terrorist' at face value.

Josephine O'Connor is a post-graduate student in Economics at Victoria University and travelled to the Philippines last year on behalf of the Philippines Solidarity Network of Aotearoa (PSNA). For more information, go to www.converge.org.nz/psna

To comment on this article, and for the opportunity to be published in the next edition of *Just Change*, write a Letter to the Editor at justchange@dev-zone.org.