

CIVILIAN PROTECION COMPONENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL MONITORING TEAM



Paul Fraleigh
1976 (Vancouver/Canada), works in Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines' Manila office as the Communications Coordinator. He holds a Masters degree in Violence, Conflict and Development from the School of Oriental and African Studies.

The Civilian Protection Component is globally unique as it embeds international and national nongovernmental actors in an actual peace process. As members of the Civilian Protection Component (CPC) of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT), all four member nongovernmental organizations are an integral part of the official peace structure tasked to ensure the safety and security of communities.

Three CPC members are local nongovernmental organizations¹. The other member is an international nongovernmental organization, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), which makes it unique.

Having had a sustained field presence in Mindanao since May 2007, NP secured recognition and acceptance from almost all of the stakeholders in the Mindanao peace processes because of its nonpartisanship. As such, it was invited by both the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Peace Panels in October 2009 to be the only international NGO of the CPC.

Abdulbasit R. Benito, Executive Director, Bangsamoro Center for JustPeace, a local organization operating in Mindanao said: "Due to their acceptance by the community, support of local civil society and engagement with the Armed Forces of the Philippines and all of the recognized armed groups at various levels, I believe that no organization is better suited to be the only international NGO in the CPC."

Civil society has played a prominent role in the CPC from the start. At the request of both the government and the MILF, NP produced the first draft of the CPC terms of reference. A unique feature of the final terms of reference is the Component will continue to perform its functions should the IMT cease to operate.

On May 5th 2010, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, those efforts paid off with the official signing into effect of the CPC Terms of Reference. By doing so, both the government and the MILF on that day in Kuala Lumpur, effectively reaffirmed their commitments to protect civilians.

The objective of the CPC is to establish a functional system and effective mechanisms for monitoring, verifying and reporting of the compliance and non-compliance of the Parties to their commitments under international and national humanitarian laws and human rights

to take constant care to protect the civilian population and civilian properties against the dangers arising in armed conflict areas (CPC TOR Article IV).

Under International Humanitarian Law all noncombatants are protected from the dangers of armed conflict. Civilian property including schools, hospitals, mosques, and churches are also protected. The law also maintains that fighting forces must distinguish between civilians and combatants at all times.

Civilian Protection Component members are tasked to monitor, verify and report on the compliance and non-compliance of the government and rebel forces in their duty to protect civilians during conflict.

A good example of the kind of work this entails revolves around an incident that took place on a secluded island village wherein 9 people were killed, 13 houses burned and 4,000 civilians displaced on April 7th, 2011. NP sent a team for a verification mission where they met a monitor from one of the local CPC member organizations. The subsequent detailed report, complete with recommendations, was shared with the IMT and both the government and rebel peace panels. The contents therein were discussed at the most recent round of exploratory peace talks held in Malaysia in late April 2011. Furthermore, had NP's international monitors not been there, the local monitor would not have been granted access to the site. This underscores the importance of having an international organization in Mindanao to complement the efforts local CPC member organizations (see picture CPC field mission).

Without national civilian protection monitors, on the other hand, NP's work would not be possible. Knowledge of local culture, language and a deep understanding of the conflict and the internal displacement crisis lays within the local CPC member organizations. Further, they help NP gain the acceptance vital to the trust they

¹ Specifically, the other three local nongovernmental organizations are: the Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC), the Mindanao Human Rights Action Centre (MinHRAC), and the Moslem Organization for Government Officials and Professionals (MOGOP).

must command in the communities where monitors live and work. Such trust is primary to the monitors' security and their capacity to protect civilians and being outsiders is not easily gained.

The three local members of the CPC have specified geographical areas in which to operate. NP on the other hand covers all conflict-affected areas and works in partnership with each area's respective CPC partner. All together, there have been 13 critical geographical areas identified as hotspots where CPC structures are, or will be, set-up. These areas are prone to outbreaks of violence.

Major General Dato Mahdi bin Yusof of the Malaysian Armed Forces, Head of Mission, International Monitoring Team, said: "CPC monitors have been crucial in providing early warning in the conflict in Mindanao. Its roles include identifying the root causes of conflict and supporting peace-building efforts in pursuit of a sustainable and lasting peace between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front."

Living and working in conflict-affected communities allows CPC monitors to assess changes in the overall protection situation in a specific community, a village, or a region. The CPC's work may include gathering information about specific incidents and affected individuals. They also monitor and try to understand trends and patterns in violence that impact civilian protection issues and report this to the Head of Mission of the IMT.

The local CPC members have volunteer monitors living throughout the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. As a complement to this, NP has 8 field offices in conflict-affected communities bringing an international element to the CPC.

In the long run the CPC proposes to have over 250 protection monitors. There are currently some 100 national civilian protection monitors and 16 international civilian protection monitors, who come from all over the world including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, China, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Sudan.

Over the years, hostilities in Mindanao have forced thousands of people to evacuate their homes and endure severe hardship. In 2004, the International Monitoring Team was deployed to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire and the peace process between the government and the MILF. The IMT structure is largely viewed as a key factor in the prevention of renewed hostilities between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the



© Nonviolent Peaceforce | CPC field mission verifying 9 deaths, 13 houses burned and 4000 civilian displacements. Zamboanga Sibugay, 10 April 2011.

Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) – the armed wing of the MILF rebels.

Prior to October 2009, the IMT consisted of two active components: Security; and Socio-economic assistance. Responding to the civilian crisis, the government and the rebel forces signed an agreement in October 2009 to expand the International Monitoring Team's mandate to include civilian protection and humanitarian rehabilitation and development, thereby giving rise to the Civilian Protection Component. Two months later, at the invitation of the government and the MILF, NP became the sole international organization appointed to the CPC, along with three local nongovernmental organizations.

The purpose of the four-components of the International Monitoring Team is to ensure that the ceasefire between the government and rebel forces is maintained and to create an environment in which the two parties can negotiate a sound and lasting peace.

Noteworthy, the new internal peace and security plan (IPSP) to be implemented, effective 01 January 2011, to the end of President Benigno Aquino's term in 2016 was made public for the first time and

takes a "people centered approach." This is a positive first step in encouraging more participation of all stakeholders. The IPSP deals with national security threats by means of a four-pronged approach, specifically through peace talks, focused military operations, development efforts, and security sector reform. The IPSP emphasizes that the primary focus in conducting military operations is "winning the peace rather than simply defeating the enemy". In the context of Mindanao, the AFP shall observe the primacy of the peace process while carrying our operations to help the government achieve its goal: a negotiated political settlement. To do so, soldiers are to be more conscious of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. ■