

## **Action Asia Leadership Forum**

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We (Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network) have not been as active as we used to be for a number of reasons, which we can discuss later. I have been listening and reading of the activities of other networks in the region and have been very impressed with the work that has been done, especially by Action Asia and GPPAC. It is time to establish better relationship and connections between the various networks.

I teach Peace Studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia. It feels strange; we are the only University in Malaysia studying Peace. It is very essential for building the future and unfortunately not many other Universities feel the same way. There are not many people in Malaysia studying peace. They look at peace issues, such as human rights, development, and all those things, but looking at those issues from different angles. I and my colleagues were trained in peace studies so we focus on these issues. We are a small department at Universiti Sains and do some work in the region. Malaysia is a peaceful country, if you want to compare us to our neighbors. There are more interesting issues outside of Malaysia than inside, if you ask me.

As a teacher I feel that when I am talking to a group of people I need to be prepared; so that is why I have prepared this. It is more comfortable for me for you to focus on something other than me.

When I was thinking of what to talk to you about a few things came to mind. I was reading an interesting book published by the Berghof Foundation, called Peacebuilding at Crossroads. The lead article was written by Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina. All of us are peacebuilders and we like to think we are doing good work on the ground, but are we really or are we just wasting our time? This article by Fisher and Zimina, the main points highlighted by them, despite the success of peacebuilding, many projects are missing the mark and we are partly to blame for this. There are more failures than successes. Peacebuilding is fragmented. We need to ask ourselves who are we working for; donors, actors, stakeholders? Or do we have our own agenda? There is always a balancing act of combining our own interests and the interests of those who want to be involved in the conflict situation and want to contribute positively. I have also gone through this type of dilemma before. Emma mentioned we (SEACSN) started in 2001 with generous funding from SIDA. They gave us lots of money and we were grateful and thankful. But like many of you, I presume, the relation with donors has always been something like a hit and miss relationship; we try to balance our agenda with the agenda of donor agencies. We sometimes feel overwhelmed; the need to write reports and all those things. Sometimes we feel we are being paid for administrative things rather than peacebuilding things. So we start to question ourselves, why are we doing these things, who is pulling the strings, and for what purpose?

There are two types of peacebuilding: technical peacebuilding and transformative peacebuilding, and there are neglected crucial values such as social justice and so on. Technical peacebuilding is when the whole relationship is project based, you have to satisfy the donor and the evaluation focuses on short term evaluation of whether you have been successful. In our university we are keen on doing these things because my bosses are all scientists and they want us to quantify all these things; how can you measure what you are trying to do? They have not been very impressed with me; they ask "how many conflicts have you resolved this past year?" These kind of things pose difficulties to people like me and people like us. Transformative peacebuilding is to transform, to change, to bring a more positive

situation than what used to be. That is what I would like to think our focus, all of our focuses, are on: to transform. Many of the things we do, we focus not on short term gains, but through our activities if we can transform the minds of the people, even just one or two people involved, to transform them to go out and do something. This is not short term, it is not project based, it is long term; the need to plant seeds and change the minds of the people. At university we have been reevaluating our strategies. We are a university based institution so we focus on our clientele, students. We try to plant the seeds of peace in their minds. But the main point is the need to go back to the roots of peacebuilding, the values, the need for empowerment, nonviolence, whatever we feel is important for us to contribute to positive conflict transformation.

So from that particular framework, are we wasting our time? I will go into the issues we are facing in Southeast Asia, focusing on three conflict areas we have been involved with over the last 10 years and try to explain and give lessons learned that we have achieved in these conflict areas: Mindanao, Aceh, Southern Thailand. There are some Mindanoans here and they will not be happy with my perception, but this is an outsider looking into the situation. Please correct me if I am wrong so we can learn from each other. In Southeast Asia we have all types of conflict: inter, intra, revolutionary, etc. We also have all types of approaches to use to approach conflicts: conflict management, peacebuilding, all these things. Peacebuilding in Southeast Asia, as I said earlier, we have all types depending on the conflict areas and a multitude of actors. From NGOs all the way to policy makers to the village groups, donor agencies, and so on, doing all kinds of activities, some of which you are already doing as part of your peacebuilding work.

Looking at these 3 conflict areas, why did I choose them? Not only because we have been working very hard to promote conflict transformation in these areas, but they have many similarities. You may see some of these things in the conflicts you are facing. Timor Leste is facing some of these issues, as well as Sri Lanka, and West Papua. They share a history of struggle for self determination. We are not talking about new conflicts; they have been around for a long time. Mindanoans say they have been fighting for more than 300 years, Spaniards, Americans, and now against Manila. Southern Thailand is the same thing; they have been fighting since 1789 since the fall of the Sultanate of Patani to the Kingdom of Siam. So you have a history of self determination. There is a relationship between the minority and majority. There are socioeconomic issues; all of these areas are among the poorest in their countries. There are religious issues, culture issues, and a history of violence and oppression. The authorities, when asked to handle the situation, send in more troops and police and suppress the movement. All of them also belong to unitary states; they are not federal system. All decisions are made in the national capital: Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok. There is less power given to people in provinces. There are also groups outside the country who in more ways than one have been supporting the conflict: financial, moral, and so on. Some live in Malaysia. We have many people from Mindanao living in Sabah for example. We have people from Southern Thailand, the Malay Muslims, living in the northern part of Malaysia basically because they are from the same group of people living in Northern Malaysia anyway. Many thousands of Acehnese living in Malaysia since the Darul Islam period in Indonesia in the 1950s, all the way to the 1970s and 1980s in the martial law period. It is difficult to quantify them, at the height of martial law, almost 40,000 Acehnese living here as refugees. With the Bangsamora people, the only official number we have seen is from the year 2000 which says over 60,000 living in Sabah, but I am skeptical of that number and would put it more around half a million because they have been coming here since the martial law period. They are now citizens but came here as refugees and were received as refugees. They stayed here and became formalized.

Mindanao is a beautiful place, for those who have never been there please go visit your friends there. But it is also a place where you unfortunately have conflict that has been happening for a long time and with disastrous affects, IDPS, hostages, etc. There are still about 200,000 IDPs. There are also various efforts that have been made to resolve the situation. There have been talks between the government and various groups: Moro National Liberation Front with a peace agreement in 1996, creating the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Another process started shortly after that with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. But you have a situation where you have two complimentary peace processes; one at the top and bottom. We have lots of peacebuilding activities, youth groups, cultural seminars, interfaith dialogue, alternative media, all sorts of peacebuilding activities have been done in Mindanao. Ceasefire Watch, Consolidation for Peace. So what happened? My interpretation is that so far it is a failure. The peace process is a failure though that does not mean it will be so forever. Peacebuilding is not successful, but not a total failure because it has not yet laid a strong enough foundation for peace. The foundation is not strong enough because there is lots of distrust between groups in Mindanao, between the Christians, Moros, Lumads, etc. This has led to the unsuccessful building of the foundation. This is unfortunate because Mindanao is the most active case of peacebuilding in the region; there are all sorts of groups in Mindanao, civil society organizations, all sorts of networks, and peacebuilding groups. They have been very creative in the work they have done but unfortunately it is still not enough. These are observations from outside. From outside we see the peace process has been very slow, due especially to a general lack of will and sincerity and honesty. And the facilitator, for those not familiar with the conflict, the facilitator between the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front is Malaysia. We have been tasked with leading the international monitoring team, which Malaysia is no longer a part of. Malaysia has been involved in this process for about eleven years and they are very tired and frustrated and are almost on the verge of giving up. This is not good for Mindanao or Malaysia because Malaysia would like to do a good job but we feel we are not able to because of the lack of sincerity of the armed actors, especially on the part of the Philippine government. They will not say this in public but that is how they feel. On the verge of signing the agreement on ancestral domain, the day before the agreement was supposed to be signed the whole process collapsed and was deemed unconstitutional and illegal by the Philippine Supreme Court. How can this be? We have been involved for a long time and suddenly the process was declared illegal. We asked our counterparts in the Philippines and we felt we had been cheated and lost face in the whole process. Afterwards people said Malaysia may not be a good facilitator so let's get someone else. Malaysia was not good because of the issue of Sabah. They said, well you cannot do these things and ask us to facilitate. It is like you are courting us and talking to other beautiful girls. So Malaysia has felt uncomfortable because of these things. The donors feel they cannot just pour in money into a bottom less pit because if the conflict is going on and on the problem is not going to be finished, so more and more money. I have been talking to people from Japan and they have been putting a lot of investments in Mindanao and they are also unsure; should we go on or should we stop? The current Philippine President does not have much will to push for a peace process because she will finish the term in 2010, next year. We are unsure if things will improve with the next president. Peace in Mindanao will have to be tied to a constitutional process, constitutional reform, and this does not seem likely. Remember, the process collapsed because it was deemed unconstitutional. So if you want the process to go on there needs to be reform. And of course non-collaboration between people at different levels because the people are divided. Of course this is normal in conflict situations. In conflicts as complex as this you have many stakeholders: Christians, Moros, Lumads, different ethno-linguistic groups, clans. People are also divided among islands and even among peacebuilders. You have people working under different organizations for different agendas: Muslim NGOs, Christian NGOs, and everyone has their own turf and territory to guard. It is a mess.

Aceh, just to compare to Mindanao, Aceh has a moderate regional and international network that supports the peace movement. But the Acehnese have been united against the government. Despite having different groups in Aceh, Europe, US, they are quite united when it comes to struggling against the government and putting forth a common front. They have a strong diaspora group. Many Acehnese live in Malaysia. They have a medium foundation, but are prepared to commit for the long term. Young activists have been living in Malaysia since 1999 or 2000, preparing for a time when they can go back and contribute to the peace in Aceh. There also have opportunistic and sympathetic leaders at the central government and this is central. If you want to resolve the problems in the conflict areas the answers will not come from the conflict area itself; you have to look at the policy makers. For the Aceh problem to be resolved you have to look to Jakarta. For Aceh, unfortunately for the people who were struck by the tsunami, but the tsunami acted as a catalyst to move the peace process forward; unlike what happened in Sri Lanka. But in Aceh, fortunately, the tsunami acted as a catalyst and the main armed actors decided to put down their arms and talk to each other. If they say they are fighting for the common good for the people, it does not make sense for them to keep fighting if the people are suffering. So they put down their arms. And you have an international facilitator; Finland has been invited to act as facilitator and has the backing of the EU. Unlike Malaysia which is a small country without backing from anybody. The ICG has been introduced to help support the peace process in Mindanao. In Aceh you have a clear mandate for an Aceh monitoring mission with a clear mission. And then the constitutional amendment for a new social contract; the constitution was reformed. In Mindanao you have to consider constitutional reform. It was reformed through the Free Aceh Movement, it was readjusted. GAM was an armed group fighting, but they wanted to transform themselves to a more peaceful political group fighting through nonviolent ways. But in Aceh the constitution does not allow local political parties; all have to be national. Acehnese people said we do not want to compete in other provinces, only in Aceh. But the constitution does not allow for this. The armed groups put down their guns so they could have constitutional reform. If before 80% of the riches of Aceh, gas petroleum, were taken out of Aceh, now 80% stay in Aceh. So they can utilize the money to develop Aceh. Because all the money has been taken out and distributed to other parts of Indonesia, Aceh has become one of the poorest regions in Indonesia. When the conflict was at its height, for example, the government started to think maybe we should negotiate with the Acehnese people and the first time they negotiated all the rebel negotiators were arrested and the people protested. If there is one rule to negotiation, you cannot arrest the negotiators on the other side.

Timor Leste has been supported by strong international friends and lobby groups and civil society organizations. And fortunately for them their case came about at a time when Indonesia was going through deep financial trouble with the financial crisis of 1997 and Indonesia's hands were tied. So it was lucky for Timor Leste. But the other cases for self determination have not been successful: Burma, West Papua.

If you ask me which region is a major conflict area, it is Southern Thailand. It is a very complex situation, there are 3 provinces—Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat—going through a very difficult situation; daily bombings and killings every day. Since 2004 there have been more than 3,900 deaths in Southern Thailand. The attacks are indiscriminate so there is a general sense of insecurity in Southern Thailand. The victims have been from both sides, Muslims and Buddhists. It is not a religious conflict, but some are painting it that way, framing it in a certain way so that they can get support of either Muslims or Buddhists. But it is not a religious conflict. These are photos from an incident when a small group of people very early in the morning went out to attack police and military checkpoints using knives and eventually all being killed at a Mosque in Battani. From a peaceful demonstration many people were arrested and piled one on top of the other in trucks to be transported for 4 hours and you have people

with their hands tied piled on top of each other and almost 80 people died of suffocation during this transportation.

There are two examples that cause headaches for us. The first is the Sri Lankan model. That model has created a lot of problems for us because many people, especially government and military, are saying if the Sri Lankans can do it so can we. You can actually win a war against rebel movements. Saying that maybe we should try the Sri Lankan model, which is very, very dangerous for us. The Mindanao model is also dangerous for us; it's not dangerous, it's frustrating. I work a lot with rebel movements in the region so over the years I begin to look like one. I have been trying to convince the rebel movements, saying to them, why don't we try different options? Taking up arms is not the only way to struggle; there are various ways to struggle. It has been very difficult transforming the minds of rebel groups. After the collapse of the peace process in the Mindanao, I talk about different options and they laugh at me; why should we follow you? If the peace process can collapse our peace process can collapse, you cannot trust the government or the people on the other side. So let's just continue our struggle with violent means. So that is why I say it is frustrating. Despite having a strong civil society peace is still decided elsewhere and by other people. So are we just wasting our time? It is not up to us if peace is finally achieved in our conflict situation. I have to apologize for dampening the mood; more drinks for people please!

So lessons. As peacebuilders you know that strengthening civil society is crucial, starting peacebuilding as soon as possible and engaging armed parties, donors, to be aware of the agendas of everybody including donors. Impartial but not necessarily neutral, this is a difficult question because we are in the business of peace. We are at the very least biased for peace; we cannot say we are unbiased. There are times when people say "oh you are partial or you are biased," and I say yes of course I am biased but I am biased against injustice, against separation. So if there is a need to balance the situation that is what I will do. In all these conflicts you have a big party and a small party; strong actor and a weaker actor. It has been our experience that it is difficult to bring the bigger party to the negotiating table because if they follow the Sri Lankan model they can win, so why should they negotiate? So balancing is difficult and we can be accused of partiality and biasness. One year I was prohibited from entering Indonesia because we are seen as too close to the Free Aceh Movement. But that is the kind of risk I have to take. These are the risks we are aware of and are taking.

As a conclusion, I hope my short presentation has raised peoples interest to look at what is it we are doing as peacebuilders. I know all of you are peacebuilding leaders in your own country. We constantly need to review; what are the things we are doing for peacebuilding and conflict transformation? Are we just wasting our time or not? It might be a good holiday or vacation or shopping holiday, but after this, can what we have gained from this meeting contribute to our work in the future? Otherwise it will just be a shopping trip that does not contribute to the conflict situation in our areas. I am always evaluating these things. I am sorry but I feel that the more I am involved the more frustrated I become. I will always tell my friends to not invite me to these things because I am jaded; I have seen too many things that make me very skeptical. But at the same time, when I go down to the field and I see the suffering of the people and the need to resolve the situation, the spirit has been raised again. The little things you do, if you feel it is not worth it, try to get over it, and hopefully whatever small contribution you can make can contribute to the improvement of the situation. And for that reason also next year I am taking sabbatical, I want to take time off and do some reflections on where I am right now and how to get back that spirit that I had in 2000 and 2001. I am jaded, Emma, I am sorry. The spirit is still there but it needs to be polished a bit. When Ngarm and I started the network in 2001 we were full of spirit. We were of the opinion that people living in conflict areas around Southeast Asia must do more for themselves, by

themselves, to contribute to conflict situations in their own regions. Honestly we were fed up with people coming from outside the region telling us this is the problem and this is how to resolve the problem. We feel we also know some of the answers. Maybe we are not as polished as these people from outside, but we need to empower and raise the capacity of the people in this area. That is why we started the network: to do more research on the area, and more research on how we can resolve the conflicts. For peacebuilding the basic recipe is the roots must always be local; the roots must always be from the soil of the conflict. That is why we started the network with regional and national coordinators to encourage people to do all these things. Throughout the years we have been doing capacity building training and so on and after a while we found out our interests and donor interests did not coincide. So we decided to not receive funding from groups we feel do not share our same values, but after a while we did not have any money. But we kept going at a smaller scale and sprouted other groups from the region. I am proud to say the Emma and Ngarm and others have worked to continue this type of work. I decided to focus my energy on these three areas: Mindanao, Aceh, and Southern Thailand. But my colleagues have done what they can to support the transformation of the situation in other parts of the region. That is why I am happy to be here; to touch base with my friends from ACT and Action Asia, and to look at possibilities to rejuvenate not only myself but our networks and strengthen our connections and also with friends from outside the region. So, thank you for your attention and I will take questions and comments. Thank you very much.

#### Questions and Comments

Ayi: Not question but sharing a thought provoked by the presentation. Are we wasting our time? Maybe that is better asked at the government side, not the one who is working on the ground. To see the peace process in a different lens; if you look at the MIM peace process it is basically a political lens. They do not talk about social or economic lens. I have been told, "you know young guy this is not an economic problem it is a political problem." I fully agree with Zam, that is very frustrating. Living in Mindanao I see this as a temporary setback. It only shows that the assessment that civil society is strong is not true. Civil society that worked in the peace process was only on one side; they did not go to the villages to educate the community leaders, armed groups both state and non state; to really create communities of peace rather than look at the regional or provincial level. We fully respect the injustices done to Muslims, but more and more when we look at the political side it only shows how limited we are in the way we look at things. On that note, I think the failure of the process is not totally bad but might open more creative ways to look and resolve the conflict. On that note I fully agree with Zam.

Kaloy: As a peacebuilder we have to be careful at nurturing ourselves and others. We become cynical, tired, frustrated, and comfortable. There are six peace processes in the Philippines, four in Mindanao. I am reminded of the story of the elephant and the blind people describing it and how the blind men cannot agree. So there are different interpretations of the situation, but that is Mindanao. This peace process that Zam was talking about only covered 500-700 villages out of 12,000 in Mindanao, so what do we do about the 12,000 villages? Our chair at Balay Mindanao was a chair in the government in the failed negotiations. The next point about grassroots level peace process, that is a myth. It is a key tension point. Both sides simply refuse to provide space for communities to be active participants in the process. I think one key point in the failure of the peace process, setback not failure, was there was not real empowered community participation because of the obsession on the historical injustice while the communities are waiting to, they've been there for decades and are confronted with basic economic problems. But the framework of the process, like any other peace process in the world, is let's sign the agreement first. That is a set back because it postpones the confrontation of the problems that affect the communities every day. Maybe the root is historical injustice but the immediate problem is poverty. The five peace processes do not offer that space. So the challenge is how to create the real space for

communities to be really empowered and therefore the process would not rely on the panel members. That is the problem, the peace process is among the leaders and a simple disagreement over terminology can fail the peace process. In other words, if there are 12,500 communities in Mindanao , and the peace process is only seeking to address 700 communities, there should be other. There is not a single solution to the Mindanao problem. The challenge for me is how to get each one of them to contribute to the eventual solution to the problem in Mindanao.

Ato: I think we should give Zam a bit of spirit to rejuvenate him. Look at Palestine, an endless conflict, but should everything stop? Education should go on, and people need food, and we don't have to waste our time waiting for the peace process while there are many things people need there. SO that is the spirit.

Dekha: The affirmation that as a peacebuilder so long as you are always questioning yourself, so long as you have not reached comfort zone, you are fine. When you feel if you are getting rusty, wasting your time, you are on the right track. When you are comfortable and think everything is rosy that is when the problem is. As a peacebuilder we should not lose sight of that discomfort, intellectually and process wise. The fact that you have the balance between practice and academia, sabbatical will be key in dealing with that process. That article is something that will always help us think and keep us on track because it is in our capacity to think what is happening.

Ramji: I think we are less information on Southern Thai conflict. It is not coming out. People understand it as a Buddhist and Muslim conflict. We only hear so many people killed in one month, and then it is gone. So it is Bangkok not allowing this information to come out, why is this?

Zam: Basically Bangkok sees it as a domestic issue and does not want to internationalize the issue. Once you do so you open a lot of doors for questions from outside. At the same time there is a general sense of insecurity. If you go there you will see fear of saying whatever it is you want to say. It is not safe at all to be vocal in Southern Thailand. Groups keep opinions to themselves and we have been trying to do more activities to make people more secure in discussing issues but then it is a situation where we also realize whatever it is we do we do not want to cause problems to the people there. For that reason the activities done there have been done outside of Southern Thailand because you never know where the next bullet will come from. The media has also been not fully reporting the kind of things happening there. There is an alternative media, internet based media, but they are doing things differently. So it is still very insecure.

Bijay: You very rightly said that there are lots of limitations, donors and people ask how many conflicts you have solved and we have no answer. This afternoon I got an email from a donor that said you are wasting your time. I said yes, who is deciding whether I am wasting my time? I came here because something needs to be done, I don't think it is a waste of time. Not at all. But the donors consider it a waste of time. We need some kind of support, if I could afford I would love to do this but we have certain things and they do too. Thank you very much for reminding us of our limitations but having to go ahead. IN regard to your statement that peacebuilding has to be done by local people, the root. I somehow cannot agree on that because you said you bring an outsider perspective. Without outside perspective, and without insider-outsider dilemma, you need this dilemma. Emma is leading this process for so many years, is she an insider or outsider? So with academic experience does it have to be by the local people and what is the role of the local people?

Zam: Maybe I was a bit strong in pushing for local people. When you look at these types of issues, self determination issues, from my experience, has to be, I stress again, it has to be with activities and involvement of the locals because self determination, determining for themselves what their future will

be like. Coming from Malaysia, who am I to tell the people from Southern Thailand to solve their problems? It has to be them. For that solution to be sustainable, it has to be the local people, from the soil of conflict. Otherwise it will just be another situation where the solution has been imposed from somewhere else and the people are forced to follow decisions that were made elsewhere. So they have to be involved. Maybe not in the point to exclude all outsiders because we also agree there is a need to support the process from outside when it is difficult or impossible to do these things from inside. For Aceh, many things were done in Malaysia and not in Aceh. So outsiders have been sustaining the process together with the Acehnese themselves. But after sometime when they are able to take ownership of the process, it is them leading the way and we are just supporting. But there is also usefulness of outsiders helping. That is why support networks like this can be very useful. But work has to be done from inside also.

Bobichand: What you mentioned about Sri Lankan model, you can win war. It is the most dangerous model, I agree. People have been learning from Sri Lanka and applying it in other parts of India. So instead of exploring nonviolent ways of resolving conflict, many countries are learning from this model and have been applying it. We have to think a lot on this model.

Emma: How do we evaluate our own peace work and admit to our failures, individual and collective? I spoke earlier this week how to revive our spirit and sustain the spirit through the work and as we looked at country programmes this week we have looked at how we can be insiders and outsiders to each other. You have presented to us 3 conflicts and of course you've connected us to a network we hope you will revive after your sabbatical.

Zam: As a conclusion, this kind of speech from experience always tend to be provocative and I think I have been successful in provoking. I am happy that to hear the comments and to understand where people are coming from. To me it has been useful because it has been an open counseling session with all of you and reaffirming my spirit and energy, which is not totally lost. If it is lost I would not be standing in front of you. One way over the last three years that I have been trying to regain that spirit is to work with young people, at university, and youth group and so on. In southern Thailand we have the Dream Keepers programme and for the past three years we've been taking youth leaders from there to Malaysia, Muslim and Buddhist, to a more open environment and be frank in discussing these issues. The reason we chose Dream Keepers is that we know the situation is very difficult there. We will not be getting close to peace in the next few years, but at least there must be a dream for peace in the future. We tell them if you have this dream there must be efforts to keep the dream. We use a lot of symbolism. We give them a lot of support to promote Dream Keepers. Whenever we go to Southern Thailand we see these t shirts and backpacks. That is what has been sustaining myself and some of my colleagues, even if we are a bit jaded and dis-spirited. We are not totally jaded. Thank you for all of your comments and questions. At least we can bring to our mind the need to constantly review our positions and objectives because at the end of the day we are all working for peace and we need to support each other. So thank you for this open counseling session.