

PHOTO: MASATANA OTSUKA



## Supporting Peace and Development in Mindanao

In March 2014, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government came to the end of a conflict that had simmered on the southern island of the Philippines for over 40 years. With a peace agreement concluded, efforts to rebuild war-torn areas have begun. One part of these efforts has been the development of institutions and training of administrators to serve as the core of a new political entity slated to begin in 2016. JICA, which began assistance efforts in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao in the latter half of the 1990s, has continued to provide support as residents work to realize lasting peace and development.

### THE SCARS OF FOUR DECADES OF CONFLICT

Travelers passing through the domestic terminal at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport will notice a unique atmosphere surrounding one particular gate. The Philippines is mostly Christian, but the women at this gate—clad in headscarves and long black robes—are Muslim. The plane they board will take them to Cotabato City on the island of Mindanao, about an hour and a half from Manila.

Mindanao is the second largest of the country's over 7,000 islands—only Luzon, where the capital of Manila is located, is bigger. It is also the site of a bitter conflict waged for over 40 years.

The history of Mindanao is complex. Prior to the sixteenth century, most areas of the island were occupied by Muslim people. Christianity became an influential force when the Philippines became a Spanish, and later American, colony. This religious influence continued after independence as Christians from other islands streamed into the area, often driving out Muslim residents, taking their land and even at times their lives. Robbed of their livelihood and safety, residents chose to take up arms against the government in a fight for independence. Since the first shots were fired in the 1970s, it is believed the conflict has claimed hundreds of thousands of victims.

In 1996, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), one of several armed groups involved in the struggle, signed a peace agreement with the Philippine government, assuming leadership of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. But MILF, seeking the right to self-determination as an Islamic independent body, broke with the MNLF and continued the struggle.

### JAPANESE-BACKED PEACE EFFORTS

Forging a peaceful resolution has been a tall challenge, as both sides have stood firm in their beliefs that what they were fighting for was right. Amid these perilous conditions, Japan stepped in to support the peace process between the government and revolutionary forces. A major motivating factor was a special kinship Japan felt with Mindanao, which prior to World War II had been home to some 20,000 Japanese.



Amid ongoing tensions, Japanese IMT member Takayuki Nakagawa (left) visits an opposition outpost in 2013 to bring together government army and MILF officers.

When the Philippine government and MNLF reached a peace agreement in 1996, Japan was one of the first countries to provide assistance toward reconstruction efforts in Mindanao. Since 2006, Japan has been involved in supporting efforts in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao to build peace between the national government and MILF. This has included participation on the International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao as well as assistance for the Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD), a unique set of programs providing a wide variety of socioeconomic assistance to local residents.

The IMT is an international body with participants from Brunei, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Norway. Its four divisions monitor security, humanitarian aid, socioeconomic assistance, and civilian protection, with the primary goal of ensuring that the terms of the peace agreement are being upheld. The multinational makeup of IMT has served to reduce skirmishes by providing international pressure to keep the Philippine government and MILF on the road to peace.

Until the peace agreement was reached, tensions over the decades of conflict ran high, with one past Philippine president even vowing utter destruction of rebels. But it was President Benigno S. Aquino III who made peace in Mindanao a priority, citing the importance of stability to the entire country. With the support of the international community, the both sides in the conflict were able to turn this last stab at peace into a reality.

### GROUNDWORK FOR THE NEW POLITICAL ENTITY

Work is now underway to establish a new Bangsamoro Government in 2016. The creation of this new political entity first requires the Bangsamoro Basic Law to be drafted and then passed by the Philippine legislature.

JICA expert Shinichi Masuda has been closely involved with the interim authority Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) and Bangsamoro

PHOTO: MASATANA OTSUKA



JICA expert Shinichi Masuda (left) visits a rural village to observe development work.

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A banner reads "Greetings to the Bangsamoro Government."



A local peace volunteer tells Hiroshima University training program participants about the city's experience of rebuilding after war.

Development Authority (BDA), supporting such efforts as the development of institutions and policies for the new government, administrator training, and establishment of basic services. "This is a completely new process for MILF," says Masuda. "It will be a real test to see if those involved can create an effective, if not an ideal, autonomous government."

BTC member Norodin Salam has high expectations, saying, "We want to create a highly autonomous government that supports not just Muslims but also Christians and indigenous people in the region. We hope to learn from Japan's experience of rebuilding from nothing after World War II." According to Masuda, the peacebuilding process is best served through efforts to enhance the livelihood of people. "No matter what obstacle may stand in the way, the process must keep moving forward. Even the smallest steps are vital."

Hiroshima University, which has unremittently shared a message of peace with the world, will also provide support to the new Bangsamoro Government. As part of a JICA grass-roots technical assistance program, Assistant Professor Meg Kagawa of its Graduate School of Social Sciences is involved in training to turn young local leaders into future administrators.

In some parts of Mindanao, the strong regional influence of various groups and clans has stifled

local governmental efforts. To address this issue, 30 individuals from Mindanao have been invited to Japan for one month during the three years of the project period to study the structure and developmental approaches of local authorities in Hiroshima, in addition to learning about the city's experience of rebuilding after war.

One local staff member, who works with Kagawa in the Philippines, has high expectations for the program: "I want the young participants to become a force for change by sharing the knowledge that they gain in Japan on local government operations with others in Mindanao."

#### RAISING THE STANDARD OF LIVING

Establishing a peace agreement will have little meaning unless residents in the region can hope for a better future. To this end, JICA is involved in assistance for various programs to help ensure lasting peace in Mindanao.

These efforts include support for small infrastructure projects in over 300 villages in the region. One such example can be found an hour's drive from the regional capital of Cotabato City, in the coastal village of Kusiong. In the center of the village is an open area where rice and other crops produced by residents are sun-dried. "At the moment



Children of all faiths come to learn at the school in Kusiong. The schoolhouse was constructed with Japanese assistance.

we are drying coconut," explains one villager. "When it's ready, we'll press it for oil."

The lively sounds of children at school provide another example of these efforts. On the schoolroom wall hangs a yearly schedule listing important Muslim and Christian holidays. Smiling, a teacher explains: "The children, even those from indigenous families, celebrate all the events. We live together peacefully, no matter what our beliefs are." Sharing the task of tending to the village's infrastructure builds cohesion by bringing residents together for a common good.

JICA's support extends beyond just infrastructure assistance. For Mindanao, which lacks major industry, there is a strong need to develop ways for residents to earn income. In Solon, a village in the municipality of Sultan Mastura, JICA experts are providing support to residents in their efforts to farm tilapia, a type of freshwater fish.

"It has been trial and error, but we've started to earn a profit," says one member of a group of smiling villagers. "People from other villages even come to learn about our operation." At a training facility in the village of Macabico, residents learn from a JICA expert how to make organic fertilizer. This knowledge is being applied toward growing tomatoes and other vegetable crops. Productivity is up, signaling a brighter future for the village.

Greenhouses and other technology help local tomato farmers protect their crops from the strong Philippine sun.



"Initially, assistance must be organic efforts to help people meet their basic needs," says Mohammad Yacob, executive director of the Bangsamoro Development Agency. As the situation improves, the next step of development is investment. Yacob has high hopes for the region. "Mindanao is rich in resources and fertile land. We hope many companies, including those from Japan, will see what we have and come here. New industries make new jobs, which helps the region develop."

The decades of conflict have driven poverty rates in southwest and central Mindanao to levels well above the national average. Insufficiencies in basic social services and infrastructure are also challenges that must be overcome. JICA is determined to continue tackling these issues until the day comes when each resident in Mindanao can live in peace, free from the scourge of armed conflict.

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