

CHALLENGES to HUMAN SECURITY in COMPLEX SITUATIONS

THE CASE OF CONFLICT IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES



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Foreword

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More and more, humanitarian workers today have had to undertake their tasks of helping others not just in the face of natural disasters but in the context of violence and strife. Increasingly, this violence has personally affected humanitarian workers themselves.

While humanitarian workers have traditionally been accorded protection and respect for their selfless commitment to save and protect lives, the last two decades have seen an increase in attacks directed against humanitarian workers. One estimate, for example, cited a 92% increase (practically a doubling!) of violent attacks against aid workers over the eight-year period from 1997-2005. Based on a report by the Center for International Cooperation and the Overseas Development Institute, for last year alone an estimated 122 aid workers were killed while in the field serving others. "Around the world, humanitarian workers are being targeted as never before."

This fact came home painfully to us in the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) in September 2008 when two of our partners were kidnapped on the island province of Basilan in the southern Philippines. Merlie "Milet" B. Mendoza, a founding and current member of the ADRRN Executive Committee, along with Esperancita "Espie" Hupida of the Nagdilaab Foundation, an ADRRN member, were on their way home from meeting with displaced communities in the interior of Basilan when they were waylaid and abducted by heavily armed men along the highway (to be identified later as members of

the Abu Sayyaf Group). While they were held captive separately (Espie for 45 days and Milet for 61 days), each and every one of us, fellow humanitarian workers across Asia and the Pacific, waited in anguish and attempted all means to find a way to secure their safe release. When Espie and Milet were later released on different periods, we all breathed a sigh of relief only to learn that kidnappings of other aid workers ensued.

My colleague Takako Izumi, Coordinator of ADRRN, and I traveled to Manila shortly after Espie and Milet's release to meet them. It was a reunion filled with tears and comfort, for both sides. As the stories of their captivity were related to us painfully, through the nights and days we spent together, it became very clear that the time was right to address the issues surrounding the chronic conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Southern Philippines. There were lessons to be learnt and shared with other humanitarian workers in the region in particular, but also those working in other complex crises globally.

As the reality of narrowing humanitarian space confronts each and every humanitarian worker today, this book hopes to address some of the issues surrounding how we should do our work in order to provide support and assistance to the affected communities whilst attempting to protect those working on the field. How do we find that delicate balance? What is clear is the need to fully understand the context, which is no less than complex, the challenges, perceptions and realities, and the

need to engage in a way that is unique to the communities at risk.

The ADRRN is proud to share this – the first of a number of publications, which we feel is essential for the region, with voices from the people who come from Asia, work among communities in Asia and understand Asian culture and values. And more importantly, as Milet and Espie show us, to attempt to transform one horrific experience to something that would benefit other humanitarian and peace workers in the conceptualization and implementation of their programs in the midst of the increasing complexities they are confronted with. There is much to learn from local expertise and knowledge and while there is a perception that international organisations and agencies “know better” how to provide humanitarian assistance and implement post-conflict recovery and reconstruction programs, it is hoped that this misguided notion be pondered upon more seriously and that sensitivity to and respect for local capacities and knowledge is increased. It is our hope

that this book will be an important reference and guide to those working in the Southern Philippines and similar complex situations globally.

ADRRN in its strategic objectives for 2008-2011 plans to publish a series of knowledge resource books in subjects related to humanitarian response, recovery and disaster risk reduction. It is our hope that the experience and expertise among our members in this vulnerable region be shared with the aim of increasing our preparedness and resilience to face the challenges to the region, from natural hazards or conflict.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Milet and Victor for their untiring efforts and passion in producing this important book, and to our ADRRN partner, Caritas Manila, for providing support. This publication would not have been likewise possible without the support from AusAID to the network, and we offer our utmost gratitude for this.