

A Tense Time in the Philippines

by Dale McGowan

AUGUST 2008 WAS A TERRIBLE MONTH IN MINDANAO. The breakdown of talks between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front was quickly followed by a resumption of hostilities on the 8th of August.

NP was one of the few international organizations working in Central Mindanao as fighting resumed. The assistance of International Civilian Peacekeeper (ICP) Michael Obodi and his NP colleagues was suddenly in urgent demand as over 100,000 civilians were displaced. The NP ICPs accompanied displaced persons to evacuation centers and stayed with them for two nights.

“Accompaniment builds people’s confidence and strengthens their aspirations for peace and human rights,” said Michael. “By offering an international presence, we also provided deterrence by raising the stakes of any violent action taken either by state or non-state actors. The presence of an international organization provides moral support and acts as a show of solidarity with both civil societies working on the ground and communities affected by the conflict.”

By August 17th, NP Peacekeepers were able to accompany many displaced families back to their homes.

Philippines Country Director Atif Hameed helped give an historic presentation to members of the United Nations Security Council in July, outlining the political, economic and social impact of unarmed civilian peacekeeping.

The event, hosted by the Canadian Mission to the UN, was “quite successful,” Atif said afterward. “It raised awareness at the highest policy level about ways in which unarmed civilian peacekeepers apply proactive presence to reduce and prevent violence in conflict areas.”

Weeks later, as peace talks broke down and violence resumed in Mindanao, Atif found himself facilitating precisely the proactive presence he had described at the UN.

Units of the armed forces began taking positions against a MILF base commander. All civilians were ordered from the area. In the confusion and panic, one of the families left behind a partially paralyzed grandmother. After trying for two days to return to the village without success, the desperate family requested help from NP.

Under Atif’s direction, the NP team coordinated with both combatants for permission to enter the area. A window of thirty minutes was granted to retrieve the woman.

After 48 hours alone, Atif said, “The woman was lying in a pool of hundreds of spent shells—curled up in a corner, but alive.” They carried her to a waiting NP vehicle and evacuated the firing zone just as time expired.