

## FIRST PEOPLE'S FORUM ON PEACE FOR LIFE

"Sowing Seeds of Peace in the Era of Empire: Christians in Solidarity with Muslims"

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2004 NOVEMBER 28 - DECEMBER 4 | DAVAO CITY, PHILIPPINES

### Coordinator's Report

Presented by CARMENCITA KARAGDAG

We have spent the past two days sharing stories of pain, hope and struggle, challenging and drawing inspiration from one another as we uphold and seek to live out the transformative power of faith. We opened this gathering in an atmosphere of celebration befitting an inaugural event, but specially one that is dedicated to making a unique contribution to the quest for peace, justice and life. After two days we have arrived at a common understanding of the deeply flawed global order and the intertwining of our major national problems, providing a powerful rationale for the call to common and globally coordinated action as we traverse the uphill road to social and spiritual regeneration. There is nonetheless some room still for deepening our grasp of the issues confronting us and resolving in the spirit of love and solidarity some remaining differences in the areas of analysis and overall strategy.

The more difficult and daunting part of our assembly is however just beginning to unfold. In the next three days we will devote most of our energies to giving flesh to our common vision and drawing up concrete strategies—a feasible roadmap if you will—on how to make the People's Forum on Peace for Life a real site for a spirituality of resistance; how we, as an assembly, can translate into some form of reality our dream of forging a new ecumenical platform for interfaith and South-South solidarity.

Let me just underline the centrality of the role of faith in challenging Empire and promoting peace. Referring again to the Manila conference in 2002, particular attention was given to the use of religious language and idioms to justify war and the project of Empire-building. The closing statement or the Manila Covenant repudiated religious extremism and religious intolerance of all forms as well as any action that degrades the lives of people, regardless of one's faith, race or ethnicity. This message from the Manila conference has become even more resonant today as many of us try to make sense of the disquieting results of the recent US elections. For if there is some lesson to be learned from the re-election of George Bush Jr., it is precisely that the American religious right—along with its neo-con allies in big business and the military-industrial complex—is so deeply entrenched in the US body politic. Not that many of us harbored illusions about significant changes that could ensue from the election of the Democratic challenger, John Kerry, viewed by most analysts and social activists as just as committed to the project of Empire, which he would present in more attractive, multilateral garb. But the nuances of the recent elections were such that it was Bush who carried the war agenda and it was he who was upheld by the electorate. What this bodes for our people's agenda for peace has yet to be fully grasped, though perhaps, as Dr. Chandra Muzaffar opined, Bush's second electoral victory could only help us in clarifying the issues and further defining our positions.

In moving forward, allow me to give an overview of the modest undertakings we, in the NCCP-hosted secretariat and the Continuation Committee of the People's Forum on Peace for Life, have tried to accomplish in compliance with the general mandate of the Manila Covenant and the concrete steps we have taken to bring us to this new stage in our common journey to build the Forum as a new ecumenical vehicle for interfaith solidarity in resistance to Empire.

As the world was bracing for the impending US invasion of Iraq a few months after the Manila conference, the CCA hosted in February 2003 a meeting of representatives of the three sponsoring organizations and a few consultants to evaluate the Manila meeting, draw up a strategy for follow-up action and set up a mechanism for implementing the recommendations of the conference as encapsulated in the Manila Covenant. The sponsors shared the conviction that the 2002 conference was a major and significant contribution to the WCC-initiated Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence. At the same time, they were not oblivious to some weaknesses of the gathering, not least the feminist critique that the conference was often patriarchal in style and methodology. While practically all the global regions and many countries were represented, there was a disappointing lack of participation from the mainline leadership of the US churches. The Hong Kong meeting agreed to convene an international workshop that shall give practical shape to the concept of the People's Forum on Peace for Life. It likewise explored the possibility of holding another conference towards the end of 2004 to arrive at a common strategy on how to carry the movement forward.

Meanwhile tensions in Asia, particularly the Korean Peninsula in Northeast Asia, were continuing to cause alarm. On CCA's request, the National Council of Churches in Korea hosted an international workshop to further develop the concept of the People's Forum on Peace for Life. Attended by some 26 participants from 12 countries, with several ecumenical leaders coming from the host country, the workshop was held in Seoul, Korea on October 10-12, 2003. Summing up the global developments since Manila, the workshop underlined the worsening global geopolitical situation, which has seen the unchecked expansion of the Empire. The workshop deplored the Empire's unabashed resort to outright lies, fabrications, deceit and manipulation of

information to advance its agenda. It underscored the need to take a multidimensional approach, challenging the Empire while lifting up people's responses, struggles and victories. It committed itself to giving birth to the People's Forum on Peace for Life within a year—a forum that will be a space to listen and analyze, organize alliances and networks, and bring people together for common action and advocacy. It hoped to foster creative expressions of spirituality of peace and life as an embodiment of people's visions and aspirations for fullness of life. Moreover, it envisaged the emergence of an ecumenically initiated vehicle for developing a theology and/or spirituality of resistance. It also considered urgent the need to draw up and work for the adoption of a people's charter on peace. The workshop called for the creation of the Continuation Committee composed of representatives from the WCC, CCA and NCCP (with a proviso to invite the NCCK) and the Reference Group comprising the participants of the workshop. Finally, it mandated the NCCP to host an interim secretariat in Manila.

To follow through the recommendations of the Seoul workshop and confirm major unities, the WCC-CCIA hosted the meeting of the Continuation Committee in Geneva on May 16, 2004. Reaffirming the role of the Continuation Committee in ensuring that the hopes and mandate of both the Seoul workshop and the Manila conference are realized, the Geneva meeting confirmed plans to hold an inaugural assembly before the end of 2004 to formally found the People's Forum on Peace for Life. It also reaffirmed the role of the Manila-based secretariat to undertake fund-raising, planning and preparatory work for the inaugural meeting. It saw the First People's Forum as an occasion to forge commitments towards realizing the vision of establishing a Peace for Life initiative as a site where people grounded in the churches and social movements converge, gather strength and build on the transformative power of the faith to reclaim peace and fullness of life for all. The new initiative was likewise envisaged as a space for raising the awareness of the ecumenical constituency on promoting peaceful co-existence as well as genuine solidarity within communities of varying religions and ethnicities.

Davao, Philippines was not the initial choice for the venue of the proposed assembly. In Geneva, Tony Waworuntu of CCA offered to have the conference hosted by Indonesia churches, an ideal venue for sure given the context of a country with a Muslim majority whose Islamic nationalists would not abide foreign intervention. He withdrew the invitation, however, when he found out that the proposed dates would conflict with a major Indonesian church assembly (in fact he is attending that meeting at this very moment). The secretariat then began exploring the possibility of holding it in Cambodia, a country which has yet to recover from decades of conflicts and devastation wrought by the US war of invasion and desperately needing international support. A member of our Reference Group based there, Emma Leslie, was only too happy to help host the conference. But in the end the prohibitive cost of meeting in Phnom Penh and the lack of infrastructure, i.e., a very weak and still fledgling NCC convinced us this was not a feasible idea.

While planning for the setting up of the People's Forum on Peace for Life, the NCCP-sponsored secretariat maintained communication with the new network and undertook a few campaigns and information-dissemination activities, among which are the following:

- Immediately after the Hong Kong meeting in February 2003 which took place in the context of an impending war in Iraq, we urged the Manila conference sponsors, partners and broader network to undertake internationally coordinated prayer rallies and vigils to be launched at the International Day of Prayer for Peace and Life on February 14, 2003.
- In early 2004 we issued an invitation to mark the first anniversary of the US-led bombing and invasion of Iraq. Our statement titled "A Call to Reclaim Peace and Affirm Life" saw the March 20 Global day of Action against War and Occupation as yet another opportunity for a gathering of emancipative force to reclaim peace and affirm life. The statement called for the immediate, unconditional and complete withdrawal of all foreign troops and military facilities on Iraqi soil. It likewise demanded official recognition of the right of the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples for self-determination, self-governance and control over their land and natural resources. Once again, we urged participants in the network to hold prayer rallies and vigils, human chains for peace, Biblical reflections on the life-and-death dimensions of war, militarization and globalization as well as various solidarity actions with faith communities. Still in connection with the March 20 Global Day of Action, we circulated a bulletin highlighting the wide variety of protest actions, specially those initiated by faith-based groups, that took place around the world.
- We came out with a message of solidarity with the victims of the Madrid bombings and the peace-loving people of Spain. The solidarity message titled "After the Carnage, a Vote against War" expressed deep sympathy for the people of Spain as they mourned the loss of their loved ones who were used as sacrificial lambs in an unjust war. Stating that "no cause can ever justify mass murder", it described the train bombings as barbaric and inhuman. At the same time, it saluted the people of Spain who used the power of the ballot to rebuke the US-led invasion of Iraq and to unseat a government that had subordinated the interests of its people to US ambitions. We lauded the progressive intentions

of the newly elected government in pursuing a path towards multipolarity in world affairs, noting that the election upset pointed towards an altering of the European power balance.

- On June 29, 2004, we issued a statement on the June 30 US handover of sovereignty to Iraq. Titled “Handover Blurs the Truth: Sovereignty Resides in the People” the statement exposed the much-touted handover as a charade and window-dressing act of the US. Far from making Iraq a sovereign state, it has merely made palatable Iraq’s continuing status as a colony and legitimizes its subservience to US interests. The statement therefore called for the relinquishment of all political, military and economic control of Iraq by the US and its allies and the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq; the immediate end to all military offensives by the US-led coalition against the people of Fallujah and Najaf and other areas of Iraqi resistance; and full ownership by the Iraqi people of the political process of transition to self-rule.
- On July 19, 2004, we issued a bulletin on the withdrawal of the Philippine contingent in Iraq following the kidnapping of a Filipino truck driver and a spate of hostage-takings and beheadings by militants of the Iraqi resistance. According to the bulletin, the hostage crisis has projected to ordinary Filipinos, who are otherwise apathetic to world affairs, the hazards that come with the Philippine government’s subservience to US interests. It also saw the hostage crisis as an important opportunity for a nation that has been historically slavish to US dictates to begin to chart an independent course that would uphold the life and well being of its people. We joined other Filipino groups in demanding that the Philippine government categorically withdraw from the Bush coalition and declare the Iraq war unjust and illegal.

As part of networking and advocacy, a few international travels had been undertaken by the Coordinator and secretariat members, for instance to Colombia to attend the international conference on Voices for Life in Colombia as well as to promote South-South solidarity with the struggles of local victims of militarization. Secretariat members likewise attended the Peace, Disarmament and Symbiosis in Asia-Pacific conference held in Okinawa late last year to network with peace movements in Japan and Korea. We also participated in the Asian Social Forum last year and the World Social Forum early this year, both held in India, during which we organized small workshops and solidarity meetings with network participants who were also in the WSF. Plans are underway to coalesce with other ecumenically related groups led by the WCC in organizing joint activities during the next World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

Being based in Manila, the secretariat had regularly participated in local anti-war campaigns and mobilizations. We endeavored to help raise consciousness among Filipino Christians on international issues by sponsoring local forums featuring foreign resource persons and experts like Prof. Hans Koechler of Austria on the issue of the US handover of sovereignty to Iraq, and Dr. Namsoon Kang, Rev. Ofelia Ortega and Ms. Lucy Mullenkei, who came to Manila for a WCC-sponsored consultation, on the issue of women, peace and war.

Due to limited resources, we were unable to undertake more ambitious projects like opening a website and proceeding with plans to hold a preparatory workshop for the special project on the People’s Charter which was proposed at the Seoul workshop and considered a priority by network partners in South Korea. We were not also able to convene the Reference Group before this meeting as initially hoped.

We have managed to carry out the modest activities listed above with even more modest resources. At the Seoul meeting we sought pledges for a minimum of \$25,000 to enable us to run the office and hire a small contingent of full-time staff for one year. We were unable to raise even that small amount, having received pledges only from the United Church of Canada and the WCC for office operations and secretariat expenses. We thus had to make do with part-time consultants and just one full-time program and administrative assistant. Making ends meet was barely achieved through the small grant for personnel support provided by the Person-in-Mission program of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) of the United Methodist Church originally meant for NCCP’s special project on globalization. We also sought special funding for travels from sponsors like WCC and partners like the Primates World Relief Fund (PWRDF) in Canada. We were fortunate to have been able to use the balance from the Manila conference expenses to augment our limited income and enable us to undertake follow-up work after the Manila conference. We were able to raise a small amount from partners for the travel expenses of some delegates from the South to the Seoul workshop, as the NCC in Korea had so generously provided for all local expenses.

For this founding meeting and First People’s Forum, we have generated around \$55,000, which, however, is still short of our total budget amounting to more than \$65,000 (inclusive of partial secretariat support for nine months and budget for publication and initial follow-up work). We are especially grateful to Karibu Foundation in Norway, which was the first partner to have made a commitment, contributing nearly half of the total amount raised. We are also indebted to the United Church of Canada, Christian Aid in the UK, GBGM-UMC, Australian Council of Churches-Church World Service, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church of the USA, CCA and WCC for enabling us to hold this important activity. For this current year,

I, as coordinator, have been able to help with secretariat work, thanks to my short-term consultancy with CCA for its Decade to Overcome Violence program and the GBGM Person-in-Mission grant.

The path to the New Jerusalem is indeed strewn, not with roses, but with thorns; and pitfalls await us at every turn. Daring to call the evil by its name—that is: Empire—have certainly not endeared us to those who wield the power and dispense the funds, including Church-based donor agencies.

We would like to emphasize that we, in Peace for Life, are simply seeking for a space in this broad ecumenical fellowship to recover the radical theological discourse of days long gone. What is this radical discourse? As Dr. Namsoon Kang so eloquently put it in yesterday's session, it is the life-affirming recognition that changing the world requires nothing less than radical egalitarianism, radical inclusiveness, radical compassion and radical solidarity. Bishop Federico Pagura, in his sermon yesterday, called for an "evangelical insurrection"—would this both be against empire and what Sharon Rose Joy Ruiz called "imperial religion" and the unjust systems it generates and legitimizes.

We beseech this gathering of the faithful to continue your invaluable accompaniment to this important process of building a radical—if you will—ecumenical and interfaith movement faithful to God's injunction against all forms of injustice (whether race-coded, class-coded, sex-coded, etc.). Despite overwhelming odds along the way, we feel confident that if we dream together, journey together, and create together, we shall overcome. Another world is yet possible.