

ON THE DISPLACEMENT AND VIOLATION OF RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES¹

IT is a great irony that prewar Philippine policy towards our Indigenous Peoples was superior to the policies the nominally independent Philippine state pursues today.

The energies of the Commonwealth government prior to World War II was devoted to identifying large swathes of the country to be set aside as national parks, where logging and mining were disallowed. These areas happened to cover much of the ancestral domains of our indigenous peoples.

But the past sixty years has seen those national parks and protected areas whittled down. They have been opened up to logging and mineral concessions, and in the process, the sacred areas and ancestral lands of our indigenous peoples have been laid waste and their rights trampled.

Cocooned in the oppressive, bunker-like presidential palace, Mrs. Arroyo lives in a perpetual stage of siege, surrounded by sycophants, pandered to by ruthless propagandists, protected by officials who, in their servility towards her, have forgotten they must first and foremost be the servants of the people.

Since 2005, the Philippines has been in a permanent state of moral and psychological crisis. The energies of the state are dissipated as the President and her courtiers intrigue against each other; the powerful are bribed, or intimidated, but the powerless are ignored.

And there are few who are as powerless, as our brethren from the indigenous peoples.

The elite democracy we have means that indigenous peoples are too scattered and few, to even matter as far as providing an opportunity to harvest their votes. They are merely obstacles to progress, as defined by the powers-that-be.

¹ *Speech of Sen. MA Madrigal, [Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Peace, Committee on Youth Women and Family Relations, and Committee on Cultural Communities], before the Third International Assembly of the International League of People Struggles, June 19, 2008, Hong Kong.*

Study groups like this one, have helped marshal facts and figures, to demonstrate the extent of the plight of our brethren from the indigenous peoples. We must continue this effort, but we must also go further.

I have devoted considerable time and energy to advocating a truly just and humane approach to the issues dear to the hearts of indigenous peoples. Our efforts –I say ours, because at best, I am merely an instrument, a means for exhorting others to lend a hand to a struggle that is first and foremost that of the indigenous peoples- have fallen on deaf ears.

Let me propose that a fundamental objective of this session, is not just to re-examine facts and figures that tell us what we already know –how daunting the situation is, and how cruelly our indigenous peoples are being repressed- but what we need to do.

Collective rights and interests have been proposed as the justification for anti-indigenous people's programs, such as mining.

We know that mining will not be the panacea to our economic ills if it carries as its price, injustice and misery for our tribal minorities; but then, we also know that neither will logging nor land-grabbing, the plunder of the seas or the forests, are policies beneficial to the collective whole.

An administration drunk on the drug of impunity, says otherwise. Just as it has the impunity to murder those laboring in the people's interest, it has the impunity to say these things –logging, mining, the setting aside of human rights- are good: and it has mustered the propaganda of the state to do so.

But I know, as well, that our constituencies, whether the nation as a whole, or its sectors such as the youth, the fisherfolk and farmers, or the causes that require our sustained advocacy –the environment, social justice, and our national sovereignty- will continue to demonstrate vigilance, and sustained defiance.

But as for the indigenous peoples: when will the day come, that their traditions and culture can be harnessed, not by us, but by them, to stand for their rights and ecology in the manner of the youth, the farmers, and the fisherfolk?

We have all seen the manner in which solidarity networks have helped stem the black tide of official killings; we have yet to build as formidable, and effective, a solidarity network for our indigenous peoples. This, I suggest to you, is our urgent task.