

Philippines: Peace Zones

by Tilman Wörtz

Many invisible fronts drift through the Philippine isle of Minsanao. For not to get into the firelines, many villages state themselves as neutral „Peace Zones“ where real shelter is only granted by independent observers. So Father Bert Layson mobilizes a network of farmers, clerics and politicians – a well working watch of armistice.

Father Bert Layson is a tolerant man. He even lets his white puppy Peace torture frogs. That's Peace's favorite hobby: Whenever a frog strays on to the patio of the Monastery of the Immaculate Conception, Peace leaps to intercept it and return it to its starting point. This is repeated until the frog can hop no more. "After all, he's just a dog," laughs Father Bert. The casual laughter suits his flip-flops, boxer shorts and rimless spectacles. He looks younger than his 45 years and at times can seem almost shy. His tolerance is especially conspicuous when it comes to religious issues. Rolled up in a corner of his cell is a prayer rug. He brought it back from a trip to Malaysia for his Muslim employees. "After all, they have to pray on their knees facing Mecca."

His tolerance ends where bombs are used against civilians and where armed men threaten the "Peace Zones," communities whose inhabitants have been promised by both military and rebels that they will never again be turned into battlefields. The bad news comes by SMS: "Bombing in Liguasan, several dead, refugees." Father Bert doesn't say, "After all, they're just soldiers." Instead, he climbs enraged into his blue Suzuki Samurai – a man on a mission.

Guerrillas of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have been fighting government troops on Mindanao, the southernmost of the three largest Philippine islands, for 30 years. The war has taken 60,000 lives and driven a million people from their homes. Negotiations start up again and again. These days the chances for a settlement are better than ever, thanks in part to courageous civilians like Father Bert. He mobilizes villages to declare themselves "Peace Zones." Forty have already signed on, exerting constant pressure on both the rebels and the government to find a political solution to the conflict.

The SMS comes from one of 60 rice farmers whom Father Bert has equipped with cell phones. They send SMS alerts when the truce is broken in one of their villages in central Mindanao. A text message costs one peso, around one cent – a price even a farmer can afford. Father Bert forwards the messages to the presidential peace adviser in Manila, to the Peace Network that unites 400 NGOs, and to his "Ceasefire Watch." Its five-member team patrols villages, swamps, and rice fields night and day in a minivan, reporting the numbers of dead, injured, and displaced after every attack.

Father Bert prefers the weapon he likes to think is strongest: the word. He drives through an idyllic landscape of rice paddies. The stalks of rice sway in the wind like a veil of green silk. The idyll has a few shortcomings. "Over there was an ambush with two dead," he says before a curve, "and that's where a hundred-kilo bomb landed, to

judge by the crater.” The priest has experience with bombs. To cut the army off from its reserves, the rebels took over a bridge on the Narciso Ramos Road, the only route through central Mindanao. Villagers in nearby Nalapa’an were caught between two fronts. Father Bert broke through the lines in his jeep, screaming at the officer who tried to stop him, and negotiated with both the rebels and the army. Only few hours after the civilians had made their way to safety on the monastery grounds, the first 105mm grenades started hitting Nalapa’an.

Father Bert’s monastery had become a refugee camp. An outbreak of measles killed 80 children. Or was it 120? At some point he stopped counting. No international observers are keeping statistics as in Afghanistan or Iraq. Mindanao is a forgotten war. Whoever invades a village, whether government soldier or rebel guerrilla, claims he is there to protect the population. “If that’s what you want, just leave them alone!” demanded Father Bert Layson. He obtained an assurance of security for Nalapa’an from both sides. “Now Entering the Nalapa’an Peace Zone” reads a sign, somewhat dented by an errant moped. The Peace Zone is vulnerable. It lacks armed protection. Outwardly, it is indistinguishable from any other village on Mindanao. The huts of bast and palm leaves stand on stilts, scattered among banana trees and coconut palms. There is no electricity or running water, and no way to tell whether a hut might belong to a Christian or to a Muslim.

Nalapa’an’s special qualities are in the details. Children play catch on a new basketball court. They used to play at being refugees in tents. Christian children talk to Muslim children and vice versa. Their parents help each other in the fields, the Muslims with the Christians’ corn crop, the Christians with the rice harvest of the Muslims. For every 12 sacks, the helper reaps one as a reward. In the battles that raged in 2001 and 2003, Nalapa’an was not destroyed as in previous years. The war moved westward. The island of peace attracted charitable organizations bringing goats, seed, and plows, laying water mains, and building houses and roads. Even the German Caritas took part in the reconstruction. With so much support going towards Nalapa’an, the government did not want to appear indifferent. It repaved the main street. Other communities pricked up their ears. They, too, wanted into the Peace Zone.

A long wooden table in Nalapa’an seats seven venerable men. A roof of palm leaves protects them from the tropical sun. They are the village chiefs of Panicupan, Dalinga’an, Takepan and several other -ans, both Christians and Muslims. They hold council. How should the expansion of the Peace Zone, scheduled for the end of November, be celebrated in the Convent of the Immaculate Conception? With prayers, of course, but then? “After we read the declaration, we stage the finale of the first inter-village basketball tournament,” suggests the elder of Dalinga’an. Most are in favor. “Did you hear about the attack in the Liguasan swamp” one asks. “Do you think they’ll retaliate?” The stocky Tiborcio Flores, with round glasses, chief of Panicupan, is the oldest in the group and steers the discussion towards the essentials. “We need the right guests of honor. Not just somebody from the MILF central committee – we need someone from their military arm, who can guarantee us that the MILF won’t violate the Peace Zone again.”

Flores knows what makes rebels tick. He spent a long military career fighting them. Shot 21 times, he still has a bullet stuck between his calf muscle and the bone. The Philippine government gave him a medal for bravery. He was an obedient soldier,

just like his two older brothers who died in battle. The job of village chief descended to him because he had proven his courage. One of his first official acts was to declare Father Bert insane. "Negotiate with Muslims? They're rebels, brainless murderers!" These days he has a different perspective. He sketches a large circle on a sheet of paper: the Peace Zone. It holds two smaller circles, the rebels and the army. "In war there is no enemy but war itself," Flores says. "We're all victims. That should go into the declaration." The others agree. The sentence originated with Father Bert, but no one remembers. It has been repeated too often.

The sentence has special significance for Tiborcio Flores. The last time he went into action, storming the town of Tulunam, he realized that the rebels were carrying American M16 rifles – the same model he used to defeat them. Even their first aid kits were labeled "Property of the Philippine Army." The rebels had certainly not looted these goods but rather purchased them, army surplus, from a corrupt officer. He remembered another story he had heard from fellow soldiers: that a high officer can only make general by earning his stars in action in Mindanao. Many battles are fought for this reason alone. The civil war on Mindanao is nicknamed "Star Wars."

Colleagues of Father Bert visited Flores' village to hold a Peace Seminar. It's not Christians and Muslims fighting, they said, but rather government and rebels. It was the political conflict that led to the hand-to-hand conflict in the villages. Did Muslims and Christians hate each other 30 years ago? No, everyone agrees, we even married each other. When Tiborcio Flores realized what a senseless cause had almost claimed his life, he decided that Father Bert might not be insane after all.

The priest stays away from the village councils. "You declare the Peace Zone, not me," he says. They would like to send him as an envoy to the rebels, to explain the measure to them. "But you know where they are! You know their camps!" he says. Instead he heads for the basketball court, where teams are warming up for the first round of the tournament. Muslims and Christians are teammates. Before the Peace Zone there was no inter-village tournament, and no communication between the chiefs of neighboring villages.

The Ceasefire Watch that Father Bert had sent out by SMS returns in the afternoon. Halfway into the Liguasan swamp they had received information that rebels and government troops were facing each other across the market square of a village 20 miles away. Tanks had driven into position, a helicopter was circling, a soldier lay dead on the ground. The skirmish began as a feud between a Christian and a Muslim family. Both called on relatives within the army and rebel forces. They were happy to oblige with reinforcements.

"We stopped the escalation at the last minute!" exults Baba Butz, the leader of the Ceasefire Watch. His eyes are shining, like a kid playing cowboys and Indians. Actually he wasn't the one who called off the battle – it was the "Shared Army and Islamic Militia Committee," which is also supposed to keep its eye on the truce. But Baba Butz and his team were there. "The Committee only takes its work seriously if we're there," he says. He is a jovial man with large, soft eyes. But when he thinks no one is watching, his smile collapses, his lips narrow, his gaze turns blank. The life he led before he met Father Bert, as commander of a 1,300-man rebel troop, left scars. Like most Muslim rebels on Mindanao, he began life as a farmer. Working occasionally for the provincial election commission, he was better off than most. He

lived in harmony with his Christian neighbors. They brought him part of their Christmas dinner, and he shared the delicacies of the end of Ramadan.

But the dictator Marcos considered Mindanao the “promised land,” initiating a program of Christian settlement. Paramilitary vigilantes known as the “Ilaga” saw to it that the Christians found plenty of land unoccupied. At the beginning of the 20th century, Mindanao was almost exclusively Muslim. Today, they make up only 20 percent of the population. The Ilaga murdered Baba Butz’s uncle and burned down the local mosque while dozens were inside praying. Baba Butz quit his government job and joined the rebels. The civil war on Mindanao came, then as now, in waves. In the interludes of peace, Baba Butz returned to farming. He was evacuated on 14 occasions, often for months at a time. Father Bert led the last reconstruction of his village. Baba Butz could hardly believe that a Christian would assist Christians and Muslims alike. “He’s good at heart,” Baba Butz says.

“All human beings are basically good,” says Father Bert. Perhaps someday Baba Butz’s relatives will come to understand him. For now, his work in the Ceasefire Watch has him labeled a collaborator.

On the next day the Watch tries again to get through the Liguasan swamp, again with the Shared Committee. Baba Butz wears a gray, misshapen vest on which “Ceasefire Watch” has been embroidered with red thread. His pants are cuffed high. The army has sent an officer with a satellite telephone tucked into his belt. The rebels have delegated the son of a sultan, a member of the MILF central committee. Both speak much louder than Baba Butz. At the edge of the swamp, they reach the dock of a fishing village. Men gather around the delegation. They want to know why the army attacked settlements in the swamp. Baba Butz has 280 families marked in his notebook as having fled – a good bit more than the 46 families the army claims. And he has been informed that a civilian was injured. He insists to the officer and the sultan’s son that she must be examined by a doctor.

“Kidnapper Gang Bombed, 17 Dead” was the morning’s newspaper headline. They are said to have taken hostages along to their hideout in the swamp: Chinese engineers, an Italian priest, businessmen from Manila. But no one actually knows whether the “Pentagon” gang is a rebel unit. Will there be retaliation and escalation, as there was a year ago? Pentagon was behind those skirmishes, financed by the MILF, says the army. When government forces attempted to overrun the swamp hideout, the MILF struck back. The fighting spread through central Mindanao, and Father Bert’s monastery filled with refugees yet again. Can the families return now to their homes in the marshes?

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” says the officer, climbing with his delicate leather dress shoes into a leaky canoe. Young men carrying bazookas, ancient machine guns, and cartridge belts looped across their shoulders take up positions fore and aft. Pirate neckerchiefs obscure their pimply faces. After an hour on a narrow, winding channel through the reeds, the canoes moor at a grenade-damaged house on stilts. Its inhabitant was able to save herself by jumping into the water. Shrapnel grazed her upper arm. Baba Butz stops insisting she see a doctor. A bandage would do the job.

The Pentagon Gang headquarters is 200 yards farther on, on stilts, surrounded by open water. The palm frond roof has been raked with machine gun fire, but there is

no sign of a massive bombing. “The leader and six of his men tried to escape in a canoe,” says a witness. He doesn’t know where the corpses might be. The officer calls off the alert: The Pentagon Gang is done for, and it was not part of the MILF. “Return to your homes, the attack is over!” he says to the men on the dock.

Baba Butz is not so sure. “They already declared the Pentagon Gang dead once, a year ago.”

Father Bert likes to get his information firsthand. He drives the blue Samurai to Fort Pikit, a colonial Spanish fortress with a view of miles of rice paddies and coconut palms. Colonel Dolorfino, the fort’s commander, sits in his command center in a baseball uniform. The Philippine flag droops by his desk. On the wall is a picture of the Kaaba in Mecca. He ordered the construction of a little bamboo mosque just behind his headquarters. Big loudspeakers carry the muezzin’s call to prayer five times a day. The Muslim neighbors should hear that Muslims, too, serve in the Philippine army. Chickens cackle under the radio tower. Once there were 500. They were intended to serve as capital for the displaced villagers to resume normal lives. Dolorfino wanted to bring them something other than bombs. But the bird flu killed the project. Now he tries to bring the villagers schools and medicine.

Dolorfino (his name means “the small pain”) is no typical soldier. He is living proof of Father Bert’s belief in the basic goodness of mankind. Father Bert interprets his having been sent to the crisis region of Pikit as a sign that the government is serious about peace negotiations. Dolorfino wants no war against his fellow Muslims. “The MILF even told us where to find the Pentagon Gang,” he says to the priest, laughing with a hint of insecurity. He knows how absurd it sounds, but the rebels are currently cooperating with the army. They want to improve their chances of benefiting from peace negotiations. The Pentagon Gang was a pawn. As a reward for their good faith, Manila made an effort in Washington to get the MILF taken off the list of terrorist organizations.

Father Bert often discusses the Peace Zones with the colonel. Just last week, at seminar at the University of Manila, they shared a hotel room, despite some differences of opinion. The colonel says, “I refuse to accept a Peace Zone that government troops can’t enter armed. Kidnappers like the Pentagon Gang could use them to hide.” That complicates the debate, as it was the prohibition on weapons, for both soldiers and rebels, that originally defined the Peace Zone. The first Peace Zone in 1988 protected Naga City, in a lovely mountain region. The council of elders was strong enough there to enforce the no-weapons rule among young men of fighting age. Today the city of 100,000 is a prosperous tourist destination for Manilans. Further communities followed, ultimately bringing the count to 40. According to a study by the Gaston Ortigas Peace Institute in Manila, the success of a Peace Zone depends largely on whether institutions like the elders and the church actively support it. The Peace Zone in Tulunam collapsed a few months ago. Rebels had smuggled in weapons and abused the Peace Zone for logistics and R&R, the army said as it occupied the city.

Father Bert can’t take away the Fort Pikit commander’s weapon. But he can evangelize. With that he doesn’t mean to convert him to Christianity. What he wants is to “bring people closer to God by showing them a way they can do good.” The way Father Bert shows him is the Peace Zone. He believes that Colonel Dolorfino is on

the right path. A year ago, when the Peace Zone was founded, there were very few men in the evacuation camps. After a few weeks, the colonel asked Father Bert: "There more men than before. Does that mean they all used to fight for the MILF?" Father Bert didn't lie – he said yes. "This is a Peace Zone," replied the colonel. "As long as the men are with their families, we'll leave them alone. We can fight somewhere else."

Not all soldiers show Father Bert so much decency. He grew up in a Muslim village and remembers how Christian death squads displayed the skulls of Muslim rebels as a deterrent. His best friend was Quezon, a Muslim. They went to school together, played basketball, stole coconuts. When soldiers invaded the village yet again, Bert and his family cowered in a foxhole until the next morning. Quezon and his family fled. They never saw each other again.

But the war continued, turning even Father Bert into a Muslim-hater. His spiritual father, the bishop of Jolo, was shot by Islamists after 20 years of pleading for interfaith dialogue. Father Bert found himself unable to go on wholeheartedly preaching tolerance for those of different faiths. He asked his order for a transfer to Pikit. Only a few days after he arrived, the civil war broke out again. The misery of the refugees quickly led him to forget his reservations. "The Peace Zones is a permanent reminder to the fighters that we are all human beings."

Father Bert collects many little examples to feed his optimism. When a paramilitary got drunk after a battle, entered the Peace Zone, and slapped a farmer, Father Bert protested to the soldier's superior: "The army signed the Peace Zone declaration, too! This soldier is in violation!" The miscreant was made to pay a 1,000-peso fine, around twelve dollars. The officer moved his unit farther from the Peace Zone in hopes of avoiding further incidents. Father Bert can tell similar stories about the MILF. After rebels violated the Peace Zone, threatened its inhabitants, and stole twelve water buffaloes, Father Bert sent a letter of complaint to the vice-commander of the MILF. "May Allah be with you," his letter concluded. The commander promised to punish the guilty. He didn't return the water buffaloes, but he did send a Koran.

That Koran now stands on the bookshelf in Father Bert's cell next to the autobiography of Gandhi and books on Islam and Martin Luther King, Jr. Around five in the evening, the monastery fills with life. Baba Butz comes back with the Ceasefire Watch and goes into Father Bert's room to pray. Two employees count the collections from the morning services. Peace tortures frogs on the patio. At the same moment, 1,700 miles east, representatives of the MILF and the government face each other across a negotiating table in Malaysia, addressing details like land reform for the first time in the history of the peace process. In Manila office hours are over. Father Bert gets a text message from the presidential adviser: "Congratulations, Father, on the actions of the Ceasefire Watch!" An employee of the World Bank has announced a visit for the next morning. He is interested in seeing the "postwar society" on Mindanao. Father Bert shrugs his shoulders. The optimism of the World Bank exceeds even his own. "Postwar? They must know something we don't."