faith and peace

Interfaith Cooperation Forum Newsletter

February 2016

Skulls at the Choeung Ek Killing Field outside Cambodia's capital of Phnom Penh are a reminder of the four years of inhumanity that consumed the country beginning in Year Zero in 1975. (*Photo by Bruce Van Voorhis)*

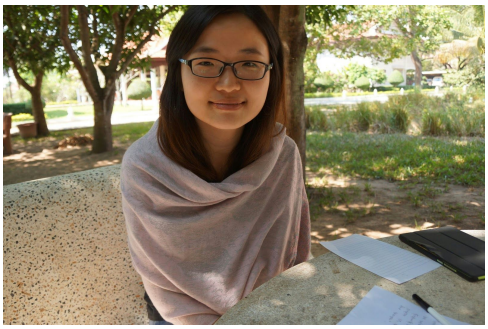
Killing Fields Are Everywhere

Tôn Nữ Tường Vy

As part of the School of Peace (SOP) in Siem Reap, participants traveled to Cambodia's capital of Phnom Penh for a field visit that included visits to one of the country's Killing Fields on the outskirts of the city and a former school in Phnom Penh that had been converted into a torture center during the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. One of the SOP participants from Vietnam shares her reflections. **[Read more]**

Thinking Critically for Peace in China

Rachel Bergen



For the first time, participants from China took part in the School of Peace (SOP) conducted by Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) in Siem Reap, Cambodia. One of these participants—Kathryn Chang—explains how her experience at SOP stimulated a new way of thinking and changed her perceptions of other faiths. **[Read more]**

'Call Me Manobo'

Rachel Bergen

When Rene Bundozan, an indigenous person from the Philippines came to Siem Reap in Cambodia to take part in the School of Peace (SOP) of Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF), his knowledge and practice of the spirituality of his people was weak. His perceptions and ownership of his identity as a Manobo, however, intensified during SOP. **[Read more]**

Human Rights Defenders Threatened in Thailand for Documenting Army Torture

Asian Human Rights Commission

Regular reports of violence have plagued the Deep South of Thailand in the three

provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat since 2004. Confronted with reports of torture by members of

the military, the army has responded in a dangerously amusing manner toward the local human rights organization which have documented the abuses. **[Read more]**

Closing the Gap between the World's Elite and the World's Poor: A Critical Step towards Peace

Sara Homayouni

An increasing inequality in wealth worldwide is not only an economic issue, the author explains, but is also a concern that contributes to conflict. The result is more poverty and more violence. Reversing this trend, she says, must begin in local communities. **[Read more]**

Pakistan Needs a Public Policy and Legislation against Dowry-Related Abuses

Dr. Rakhshinda Perveen

A survivor of dowry violence in Pakistan describes the apathy as well as the brutality of this practice against women in her country. She also raises a series of significant questions about dowry-related violence that can be summarized in one simple question: How much longer must women and girls in Pakistan suffer from this tradition? **[Read more]**

Photographs of the victims of S-21, the former school in Phnom Penh that was transformed into a center of torture by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, offer portraits of the lives of the people whose lives were taken from them for the sake of ideology. *(Photo by Bruce Van Voorhis)*

Killing Fields Are Everywhere

Tôn Nữ Tường Vy

On my last trip to Cambodia, I told a local friend I intended to visit the Killing Fields. Thinking a bit, he later smiled and said, “killing fields are everywhere in my country.” He knew too well that I mistook Choeung Ek[1] as the only killing field in the country, which is well-known among tourists. In reality, there are approximately 300 execution areas and mass grave sites across Cambodia[2] created by the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. My

friend's bittersweet smile somehow helped me to penetrate the pain that has been lingering for generations after Year Zero.

The Eerie Tree

The Democratic Kampuchea government (1975–1979), which was more frequently called the Khmer Rouge, practiced extremism, aiming at leading Cambodia back to primitive communism where everyone was equal as well as abolishing the rich-poor gap and exploitation. By evacuating people from the cities to the suburbs and through forced labor, famine, murdering intellectuals and resistants, etc., the Khmer Rouge killed an estimated two million to three million people, more than a quarter of the Cambodian population at that time.

I visited Choeung Ek Genocide Center on a hot morning. The place did not appear as terrifying as I had imagined, but rather emerged like a garden surrounded by trees and rice paddies. But as I passed the mass graves, which were covered over and ringed with bamboo fences, my heart sank.

The preservers deliberately left several dead men's teeth and bone fragments sticking out of the ground. The tour guide explained to us about the Khmer Rouge's killing methods, the majority of which involved farming tools to save money for guns and bullets. This story did not scare me, but sadness filled my heart.

It was not until we arrived at the mass grave beside the Killing Tree, which I had already read about, did I truly feel frightened. This huge, oddly shaped, eerie tree had been a site where soldiers beat children and infants to death. They were then tossed into a hole, sometimes as their parents watched. With an ambitious aim of pushing economic growth through rice exports (the target for Type 1 paddy fields was six to seven tons per hectare while a normal paddy field was three tons per hectare; meanwhile, field productivity was only 1.5 tons per hectare), the Khmer Rouge did not want to waste any food on the hungry young mouths. They also wanted to prevent any future threats.

Approaching the site, I smelled something very rancid and felt a strange sense of uneasiness. Nothing but trees and tourists were around though. I told myself that places like this one were clear of blood after decades in the tropical rain and wind and because

of the ongoing maintenance. Nevertheless, my heart still said perhaps the evil of the place, as well as the mental and physical pain, had remained. Later that day I asked if my friends had smelled anything. They said no.

When we moved to another area, I noticed a Filipino friend walking slowly behind the group. Returning to accompany him, I saw him crying. Raz is a Muslim who appeared as a strong man and even had joined an extremist group in the Philippines. It was not normal for him to uncontrollably cry like that.

“I can’t believe that people could have done such things to each other,” Raz said.

The Smile of a Long Departed One

I then visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (“Strychnine Hill”) in urban Phnom Penh. It used to serve as a school before it was turned into Security Prison 21, or S-21. Classrooms became torture chambers where prisoners were taken to extract secrets before being transferred to Choeung Ek for execution.

It was the second time I had come here. My first visit to Tuol Sleng was an unforgettable memory. All of the exhibits, the stories or haunting images of its past history of brutal torture did not scare me. I just silently pondered and grieved over humanity. Still, what had me startled was a distinct image on the prisoners’ portraits board: a smiling man. I cried. It was this single image from the Khmer Rouge regime that brought me to tears, even though it was free of blood and seemingly free of fear.

“I meet you again,” I whispered to the photo on my second visit, hands touching the glass. “I did not think of returning the last time here.”

Now I understood the tears. They were for the last shred of dignity during the man’s most desperate moments. There were numerous photos showing wretched, miserable or even expressionless faces. Yet, in that moment, the man smiled, though he knew too well that in just a few more minutes his life would become intolerable. Perhaps he had prepared himself and accepted the cruel fate with a blithe smile. Perhaps he only wished the last memory of his life would be marked with his most lighthearted face. Nearly everyone brought to Tuol Sleng died.

Or perhaps this man smiled at the Khmer Rouge soldier who was taking his photo and for the staff who would be reading his file and seeing his photo. It was not a forgiving smile. Forgiveness was too costly a thing. The smile, I think, was to remind those in the Khmer Rouge cadres of some humanity left deep down in their cores, that he was not a victim, a prisoner, or anything that they labeled him. No less than them, he was a human being.

I wondered if there had been any Khmer Rouge cadres who were moved seeing this photograph. Even if there had been, it would not change anything. The photo lived in my memory and brought me here once again.

While I walked around, a group of Vietnamese tourists arrived, showing the pictures to their children.

“Here, look at this, do you see Pol Pot? He is evil. Child labor—oh my, how cruel! You should focus on your studies, or you could be working so hard just like this, dear.”

I could not bear such impolite noise, so I walked out. The school yard was pleasantly cool thanks to the large canopies of mango trees heavy with their ripe fruit. Occasionally, a flock of birds swooped down to peck at the grains and then fly back to freedom. It was hard to believe that 30 years ago this beautiful, peaceful country had been in sheer terror. The tourist simply said, “Pol Pot is *evil*.” Does that explain enough? I thought, however, that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge’s leaders committed two serious mistakes.

During French colonial rule in the first years of the 20th century, an alarming event shocked the French, Cambodian officials and the common people. At that time, the Cambodians were heavily taxed, but nothing had happened that might affect the political status. In April 1925, Félix Louis Bardez, a tax official, visited Krang Leav in Kampong Chhnang Province, a village that is 90 kilometers north of Phnom Penh, to collect additional taxes for constructing a resort. The intensity between the official and the people grew so high that the Cambodians killed him as well as the escort with chairs, axes, fences, etc. The event ignited the Cambodian nationalist movement, and it went down in history as an urban legend celebrated from generations to generations.

One month after the Bardez assassination in 1925, in the neighboring province of Kampong Thom, Saloth Sar was born, a man who later became known as Pol Pot. The polite, smart Saloth Sar grew up with stories about the injustices the Khmer people faced and the victorious Bardez assassination. This was his inspiration for a better world. This was one of the reasons for his desire to reform society so there would be less exploitation and no social classes would remain. If religions, like Buddhism, could not accomplish this objective, then only politics could.

Saloth Sar made two serious mistakes though. The story about killing Bardez in the past was deeply imprinted in his mind and fueled his belief that violence was a means to change society. Saloth Sar did not care about the hierarchical system, which had been rooted in everyone's mind for such a long time (the richer, more powerful will always be prioritized). His attempt to create social equality turned out to be a reversed version of the power pyramid: the bottom went on top, and the head fell down. Nothing ever changed, however.

Observing the classrooms-turned-prison chambers, it struck me as a profound lesson of history: any ambition to enforce rapid and radical change will only result in devastating consequences. Take, for example, Jayavarman VII who passed the resolution that people living within the Khmer Empire all had to become Buddhists in order to create a quality society. Another example is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL,[3] with the resolution that the world must all follow Islam and apply its religious law to secular governance to achieve a right and healthy lifestyle in accordance with Allah's words. How we interpret history will affect the perceptions and behavior of future generations.

Later in my visit to Tuol Sleng I noticed a woman reading to a little girl to my left. It was delightful watching them.

The woman and her grandchild were both immersed in their book. Occasionally, the girl turned to her grandmother and asked about unfamiliar words or details. A few minutes later she took something out, and the two of them seemed to have a lot of fun. Suddenly, a mango dropped down right onto my bench. This trivial episode made me recall the mango trees in front of my grandmother's house where I also looked forward to all the fallen fruits that can turn into a nice treat. The little foreign girl looked as if it was a

strange thing and rushed over to watch the wobbling fruit—maybe she never saw this at home before.

I believe in teaching children constructive habits, such as reading books or searching for information by going to museums or traveling. The people I met back in the Tuol Sleng's prison cells, either old or young, were all silent, reading carefully, walking orderly and not discourteously commenting out loud as if they worried that others might not understand the exhibition. Instead, they meditated or quietly discussed their thoughts with each other or took time to write down a note in the memorial book. There was so much to learn from them.

Rising from the Ashes

How this small nation recovered from its genocidal regime has always puzzled me. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, the United Nations, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), together with the Cambodian government, joined in the effort of resolving the humanitarian crises.

A total of US$250.7 million[4] has been spent on trying the most senior war criminals through the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia since its establishment in 2005. As necessary as the court proceedings may be, a survey of people's opinions on the court's budget reveals that a part of the money should be used to improve the healthcare system. The Cambodians suffered tremendously, both mental and physical pain, due to torture, famine, a shortage of medication, bombings, etc.

"My illness cannot be cured here, but I have no money for overseas treatments," said a man with spinal tuberculosis.[5] "It would be better if the court's budget was invested in healthcare instead."

Although his view on money was not totally reasonable, it revealed an important matter. The court used punishment as a way for the guilty to make amends for their wrongdoings, which is retributive justice. Such a practice is undeniably important. Still, why does justice cost so much? When someone is put in jail, that person is seen as someone at the bottom of society. This punishment though will in no way change the system or society. In contrast, many indigenous communities' traditional way of healing is

based on restorative justice. It gradually heals the relationship and community without plaguing them with debt.

Emma Leslie, executive director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), told me a story about a boy during the Khmer Rouge period who accidentally blew sand into the eyes of a Khmer Rouge soldier's daughter while playing with her. The father was enraged, cast him out of the village and forced him to do hard labor. After the regime's collapse, the soldier's family was isolated and later impoverished. Twenty-five years passed by, and the boy returned, now a man, launching an economic development project for his village. He began from the poorest of all, including the former Khmer Rouge soldier's family. The villagers eventually initiated communication with that family as part of their community's reintegration.

Time is the best healer. International organizations tend to want to solve problems as soon as possible. In contrast, indigenous communities have long-term resolutions. It cannot be easily judged which one is better or if we should choose either. However, it stood out as a reminder of the potential strength of the laborers who had never been lawyers or judges. Apart from temporary solutions, permanent ones concerning education, healthcare, etc., are never excessive.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the Cambodians established a brighter future for their own people. For example, the Working Group for Weapons Reduction (WGWR) turned Cambodia from a nation with arms everywhere in 1997 into a safer place with almost no presence of guns. Established in 1998, this group advocated the government's initiation of weapon collection programs throughout the nation in 1999, helped update the Law on the Management of Weapons, Explosives and Ammunition in 2005, assisted in banning citizens from owning guns or explosives, provided teachers with training and educated children on the dangers of firearm possession. These initiatives helped usher in a peace-building process in Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) advocated the abolition of anti-personnel mine production and their use as well as raising awareness of the rights of those disabled by mines. The Cambodia Development Institute helped facilitate reconciliation between former Khmer Rouge soldiers and victims and prepared them with conflict assessment skills, ranging from water distribution to domestic violence.

There were even individuals who quietly volunteered in translating Buddhist scriptures in universities, teaching English and opening libraries in prisons, etc.

Pol Pot's sister and nephew are another story. They dedicated their whole lives to teaching and developing education in their own ways. When asked by the *New York Times* why she chose to continue to live in the country where her brother had committed unforgivable sins, Saloth Roeung answered: "To me, Saloth Sar is my brother, not Pol Pot. Whoever he is though, my responsibility is to rebuild the country which he destroyed." To her family, education was the only way for them to better their country, to mend the past for the future.

The pain and loss will eventually be healed, though the scars remain intact. My return to Cambodia was because I was seeking an answer and to process the depressing thoughts I had about this "land of sorrow" I learned about in my previous trip.

This nation had taught me an eternal lesson, however: regardless of how dark today is, a brighter tomorrow will eventually come.

Tôn Nữ Tường Vy was a Vietnamese participant in the School of Peace (SOP) that was organized by Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in August and September 2015 and January 2016.

Thinking Critically for Peace in China

Rachel Bergen

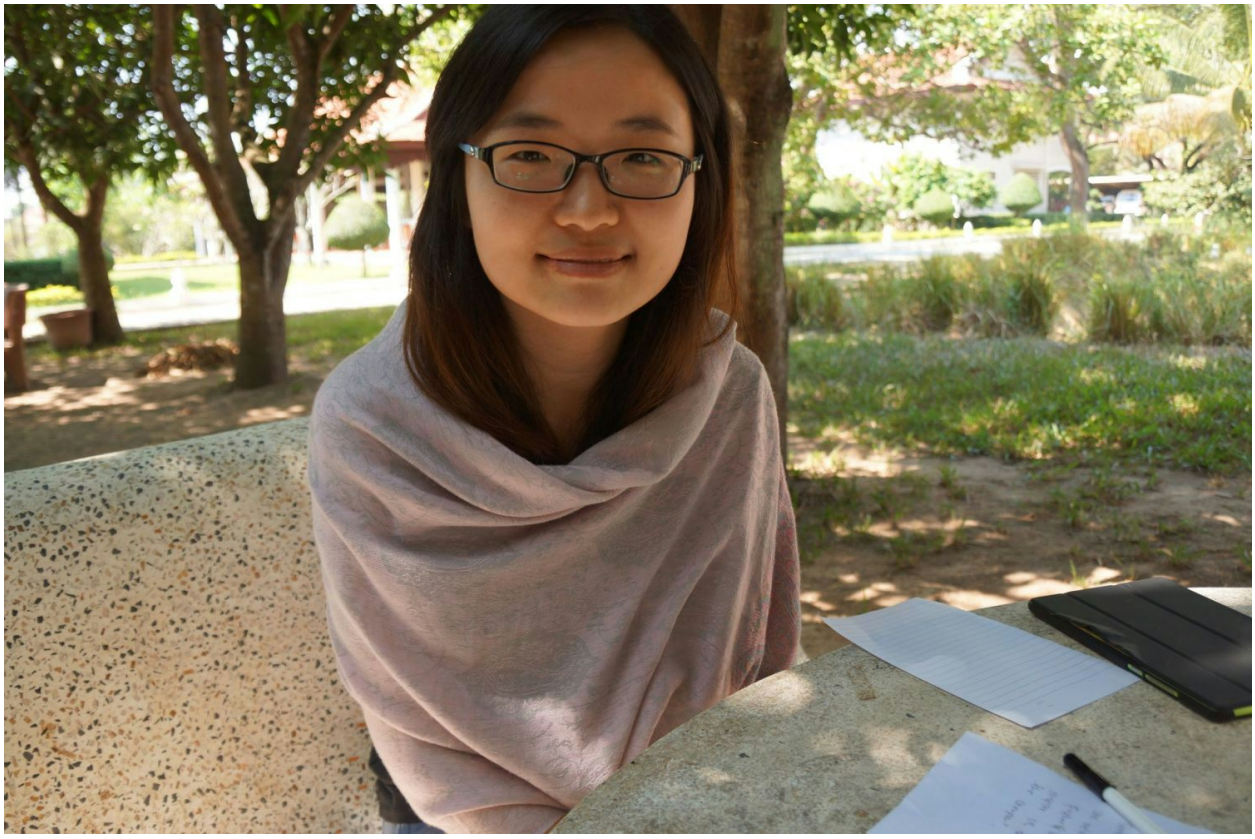
As a student in China, Kathryn Chang took exams every year. She learned there are right and wrong answers, but no room for opinions or criticisms.

As a result, Kathryn didn't really challenge the status quo. Creative thinking wasn't encouraged in her school or even in her wider community as she got older.

Kathryn attends a government-approved church in her home community. The church's focus, she says, is primarily on what happens within the church on Sunday morning.

“I think most of our attention is on the church work. Our worship, our sermon, our Bible study group, but we don’t have too many ideas of how we’re going to care about the community around.”

Things began to change for Kathryn when she decided to quit her job and try something new.



Kathryn Chang, a School of Peace (SOP) participant from China *(Photo by Rachel Bergen)*

School of Peace

Kathryn participated in the 2015–2016 School of Peace (SOP) where she experienced a different way of teaching and learning.

There are no wrong or right answers at SOP. Questions and criticisms are encouraged, and thinking out of the box is supported.

Fundamental to the school is engaging with people, issues and beliefs you don’t agree with or understand. That was formative for Kathryn.

“I think the most important lesson is the engagement and dialogue,” she says, referring to engaging with people of different faiths. Kathryn observes that for many Protestants she’s spoken with in China even engaging with Catholics is radical.

“In my church, we don’t have too many chances to know about other religions. The interfaith idea is really new in my place,” Kathryn explains.

She says some people at her church worry their faith will waver if they engage with people who are different or follow other religions.

Although challenging, through Kathryn’s studies at SOP, she broadened her worldview over time.

This is a core tenet for Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). According to SOP coordinator Max Ediger, engaging with people of other faiths can be very difficult for some participants, but it’s an important part of building peace.

“The more we are deeply rooted in our own faith, the less we feel threatened by people of other faiths,” Max explains.

“Before we can dialogue with people who are different, we first need to be comfortable with our own identity and faith. Then we can be open to learning some truth from others even if we don’t fully agree with them.”

During a three-month break of SOP and a return home, Kathryn challenged herself and went to visit a Catholic theological seminary in China, although people are not encouraged to do so in her church.

“We have a lot of assumptions about Catholics because we believe they worship Mary and not Jesus,” Kathryn says. “It’s common in China to think Catholics are different than Christians. What we [Protestants] believe is different; they’re not real Christians. I wanted to go to talk to them to clarify the assumptions in my mind.”

There she learned Catholics are showing respect to saints, not worshipping them.

“I don’t agree with all of the things they believe, but now I understand what they really believe.”

Non-violent Peacemaking

During the break, Kathryn also shared some of the lessons she learned at SOP in a conflict resolution program her church started.

Thus far, the program is meant to promote peaceful conflict resolution in everyday life, but the church presently plans to only use the curriculum in marriage counselling and in prisons.

Kathryn hopes to use what she learned during SOP to take the curriculum a step further but isn't sure what the content will be yet.

There are 12 parts to the curriculum for the program, but Kathryn hopes to build an additional module based on understanding identity and tools for transformation.

"I think the study here [at SOP] is very meaningful. It's more than I expected. The ideology gives you a new idea how to really love people, not just by what you're saying, but what you're thinking in mind and heart," she says.

Kathryn feels her mind and heart have been changed during her time at SOP and hopes to work to increase engagement and build peace in her community.

Rachel Bergen is an intern from Canada working for Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Her one-year internship is supported by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Rene Bundozan, a Manobo from the southern Philippines *(Photo by Rachel Bergen)*

‘Call Me Manobo’

Rachel Bergen

Rene Bundozan’s identification papers indicate he is a Filipino Christian. That’s because there is no option to declare himself by his indigenous spirituality.

The 25-year-old is from the province of North Cotabato on the island of Mindanao and comes from the Ilianen Manobo indigenous community in the southern Philippines.

At an early age, Rene became a Christian and lost touch with his native spirituality—something he says is a problem among many other indigenous youth.

“I never went to the indigenous community when I was growing up,” he explains. “I don’t know very much about my culture. I don’t care because I’m already baptized as a Christian. Every Sunday I go to church.”

Rene didn’t learn about the Manobo people in school either.

According to the United Nations, the Philippines is a culturally diverse country with an estimated 14 million to 17 million indigenous people (IPs) belonging to 110 ethno-linguistic groups. About two-thirds of the country’s IPs live in Mindanao. The country mandates state recognition, protection, promotion and fulfillment of the rights of indigenous people and the right of IPs to manage their ancestral domains.

Still, people like Rene experience discrimination.

The issues are hundreds of years old from the time when the colonial power Spain “Christianized” two of the three main island groups of the Philippines, Luzon and Visayas, in the 1500s. This experience created a longstanding rift between the majority Christian Filipinos and minority Muslim Moros, who are largely based in the southernmost island of Mindanao. Indigenous people were caught in the fray of the religious conflicts.

Many IPs began to believe that their spirituality that had been passed on from generation to generation wasn’t legitimate and slowly became assimilated into the two larger faiths, especially Christianity.

“I think it’s because they were ashamed. Because they [the indigenous people] are different,” Rene says.

The effects of colonization are still felt today, Rene says.

He earned a teaching degree at the University of Southern Mindanao and says people there wouldn’t call him by his name, just “IP” for indigenous person.

Rene would respond, “Call me Manobo. I’m proud of my culture.” In truth though, he didn’t know much about it.

School of Peace

In 2015, things started to change for Rene.

He decided to take part in the School of Peace (SOP) held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, by Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). At the beginning of the first module, he introduced himself as indigenous despite what it says on his ID card.

As he began to open up about his background, Rene talked more to SOP coordinator Max Ediger about his ethnic background, his confusion about his spiritual identity and the conflicts between indigenous groups at home.

CF believes strongly in upholding traditional indigenous spiritualities as legitimate belief systems that deserve as much respect as any of the major world religions. Max explains that too often outsiders dictate changes in indigenous communities because they believe they are uncivilized or evil.

“I want to encourage our indigenous participants to deeply explore their histories and beliefs to find the wisdom that exists there and then share that wisdom with the world. We will all benefit from that,” Max adds.

This year at SOP Rene and two indigenous men from Papua, another part of Asia colonized by Christians, decided to return home and explore their native spirituality and culture further.

For Rene, this was a new experience.

“Before SOP, nobody encouraged me to go back to my culture like that, but here at SOP my mind twists,” Rene explained.

Max encouraged Rene to use the three-month break between the second and third module to visit Manobo communities and learn from them.

“It was very sharp in my mind that I need to study my culture about our religion,” Rene says.

Learning from His Own Community

When he returned to the Philippines, Rene found it difficult to find people who could answer his questions because so few people were taught the traditional wisdom.

In December, he went to the mountains in North Cotabato to visit a community who still lives according to the traditional Manobo culture and spirituality.

There he learned how interconnected the earth and Manobo spiritual practices are.

One prayer involves a plate of rice, water, a metal coin and seeds. It is split into four quadrants to symbolize the four directions.

“Rice is our body, a source of life. Without rice, we cannot live—water also. The coin is a measurement of how heavy your faith is in God. We ask the God for this seed to grow well,” Rene explains.

During his visit, Rene was inspired to continue his journey of learning about his spirituality and passing down the knowledge.

He hopes to teach in Manobo communities in the future; but given the chance, Rene will broaden the curriculum to share about their heritage and spirituality of the Manobo Ilianen and teach their mother tongue.

Rachel Bergen is an intern from Canada working for Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Her one-year internship is supported by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

While the Thai military may perceive its role in the Deep South as protecting the people, including the Muslim community that forms the majority of the people in this part of the country, the army has responded to reports of torture by its personnel by threatening the human rights defenders who have documented these human rights violations. *(Photo from www.eastbysoutheast.com)*

Human Rights Defenders Threatened in Thailand for Documenting Army Torture

Asian Human Rights Commission

On Feb. 11, 2016, the Thai army threatened human rights defenders for documenting the military's continued use of torture on detainees in the country's Deep South. Maj. Gen. Banpot Poonpien, the spokesperson for a specialist counterinsurgency agency, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), accused the human rights groups of fabricating accounts of torture to obtain funding from abroad. He also asked whether or not the groups had the mandate to investigate the work of state officers. He ended with the threat that they could be committing defamation by issuing a report referring to international law.

The army statement followed the release of a 49-page report by three local groups, the Cross Cultural Foundation, Duayjai and the Patani Human Rights Organization, documenting 54 cases of torture in the Deep South of Thailand, 32 of them in 2014 and 2015 alone. The methods of torture that were documented include beatings, strangulation, mock executions, crushing of body parts (including the head), drowning, stress positions, electric shocks, sexual assault, extended confinement in extremely cold rooms or in the sun and the use of loud noises and other methods to disturb the detainee and prevent sleep. The torture was conducted inside major army camps and facilities in the Deep South as well as at the emplacements of special forces units throughout the region, including at the compounds of Buddhist temples where soldiers are based.

Given the intense militarization and intimidation of the populace in the Deep South of Thailand, this number of cases is likely only a small fraction of the total number of torture cases there, to say nothing of Thailand as a whole. The documentation of torture and support for survivors in the Deep South is especially difficult, and the work of these groups has been conducted in recent years with special caution and in accordance with international standards set down by the Istanbul Protocol. It also has been supported in part by the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. In addition to documenting and advocating against the incidence of torture, presently the groups are aiming to raise funds for the establishment of centers to provide comprehensive support to survivors—something that the government of Thailand has manifestly failed to do.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) congratulates and commends these groups for their work on this report and with survivors of torture in the Deep South of Thailand. It denounces the response of ISOC to the report. The allegation that the groups might have fabricated the report's contents to attract funding is laughable. It would be funny but for the fact that the army in Thailand, which today has the dubious distinction of being the only country in Southeast Asia ruled outright by a military dictatorship, has the capacity to make good on outlandish threats of exactly this sort.

The most telling aspect of the army's response to the report is not the manner in which denials of wrongdoing were issued but rather Maj. Gen. Banpot's rhetorical question of under what mandate—by what power and with what responsibility—the human rights

groups scrutinized the work of state officers. This response reveals that the Thai army's mentality remains "nobody has a right to investigate us." It is indicative of the attitude that the army has and that it will continue to enjoy impunity for its crimes committed against civilians. This attitude is one of the motivations for the army to intervene repeatedly to impede, obstruct and destroy the prospects for democratization in Thailand. After all, it is a condition of democratization that military personnel must be subject to scrutiny and oversight by civilians. This condition is one that the Thai army cannot, and will not, tolerate as shown clearly by the response of Maj. Gen. Banpot to the human rights defenders' report as well as by its continued use of torture with impunity as documented in the report.

The AHRC urges all concerned groups in Thailand and abroad to join in solidarity with these rights defenders and to send a clear and loud message to the Thai army that its bullying tactics will not be tolerated. The threat by ISOC to the human rights defenders deserves the strongest condemnation from all concerned members of the international community, especially all U.N. procedures concerned with the elimination of torture. That the invocation of international law by human rights groups should be construed as constituting some kind of defamation against the Thai army is not only nonsense, it is dangerous nonsense. The whole premise of international law is that, where domestic law is lacking or deficient, it serves precisely the role that the human rights defenders in Thailand have assigned to it. The implication of the army officer's statement is that the entire international legal regime lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the Thai military.

In this regard, it is notable that Thailand has already ratified the U.N. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) but has failed in its responsibility to translate the standards of international law into domestic equivalents as required by the convention. Thus, if Maj. Gen. Banpot or his counterparts seek to criticize anyone in this regard, the AHRC recommends that they turn their attention to the failures of their own government to fulfil its obligations under international standards to which it has voluntarily subscribed. They should cease laying the blame for the human rights abuses of the Thai military on those persons who do no more than document them and should instead seek to support the survivors of torture, arbitrary detention and other crimes under international law.

(The statement by ISOC is available here: https://voicefromthais.wordpress.com/2016/02/11/unofficial-translation-isoc-addressing-the-report-on-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading-treatment-in-the-deep-south/)

(The report *Torture and Ill-Treatment in the Deep South* is available here: https://voicefromthais.wordpress.com/2016/02/10/press-release-launching-torture-report-pattani-full-report/)

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is a regional non-governmental organization monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984. More information is available on AHRC's web site at <http://www.humanrights.asia>.

Closing the Gap between the World's Elite and the World's Poor: A Critical Step towards Peace

Sara Homayouni

Published a day before the 2016 World Economic Forum, Oxfam's latest research report breaks down some startling figures. In 2010, the 388 richest people in the world had the same wealth as the poorest half of the entire world population. As of 2015, the top 62 richest people in the world have as much wealth as 3.6 billion people—again, the half of the world's population with the lowest wealth. Comparing the 2010 report to the 2015 report shows wealth inequality is increasing and we need to do something about it.

To build peace, we must promote fair and sustainable development that will relieve inequalities. Inequalities can drive and perpetuate conflict, which, in turn, hinders all aspects of development, leaving conflict areas caught in a continuous struggle.

Income inequality impedes growth and hits the poorest of the world the hardest as their wages plateau while chief executive salaries continue to increase rapidly, not to mention that rising income inequality intensifies other inequalities (to illustrate: 53 out of those 62

wealthiest people are men). To close this wealth gap and therefore ameliorate other existing inequalities, Oxfam has made suggestions for policymakers that stress transparency and easier accessibility. They have also called for an approach that would require all countries, developed and developing, to cooperate in ensuring a multilateral system for exchanging information on a regular basis.

Neighboring skyscrapers and slums along the Pasig River in Manila reflect the inequality in wealth found in the Philippines. For more than a decade, when the poor in the country seek to uphold their rights or social justice activists seek to promote and protect those of the marginalized, they often find themselves the victims of extrajudicial killings, disappearances or other human rights violations. *(Photo from http://hanzflorentino.com)*

In addition to Oxfam's suggestions of governmental participation, we should also focus on the advocacy of local peacebuilding. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations for 2030 aim to further the U.N. millennium development goals (MDGs) set for 2015 with a new set of objectives. The MDGs reached the goal of halving the world's extreme poverty, but now the bar is set higher with SDG No. 1: to eradicate extreme poverty altogether. In addition, the SDGs now also make clear the important link

between development and peace. SDG No. 16 sets a goal of promoting "just, peaceful and inclusive societies" as a critical part of the global development agenda.

If we are to reduce inequalities and violence and find permanent, peaceful solutions to conflict, local communities themselves must be at the forefront of leading the peacebuilding and development agendas in their societies. By supporting local peacebuilding, we support sustainable solutions to conflicts and strengthen the development potential of societies. Building peace from the ground up, instead of trying to impose it externally, is lasting and results positively in every aspect of a society, including the economy. Extreme violence and conflict have dire effects on a country's economic growth and result in injustices that last for years. Areas that are ridden with conflict have to face healthcare costs, the costs of criminal justice and social welfare responses in addition to the costs of lost productivity and security services that could have been put to more constructive social spending. Promoting peaceful alternatives to violence and advocating for the promotion and protection of human rights is vital to the process of eradicating injustices and reducing global inequality.

We can look to Somalia as an example of how violence hinders development in all aspects, including economic development. Decades of extreme violence and civil war have destroyed Somalia's economy and infrastructure, exacerbating poverty and famine. Yet from within Somalia, we can find hope in a peacebuilding project recently launched by Peace Direct and funded by the European Union. This project aims to train more than 1,000 young people in leadership and conflict management so that they will have the skills necessary to prevent violence when tensions grow. These participants will then train other young people in what they have learned. In addition, the project will give vocational training and apprenticeships to participants so that they will gain skills to earn a living and contribute constructively to the development of their societies.

We can close the wealth gap by 2030, country by country, while promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies. A call to policymakers and for government participation is crucial, promotion of peaceful and just societies is vital and taking action is critical. Without change, the current trend of increasing wealth inequality will continue, compounding conflict and undermining the right to human dignity for all, and the world can't afford this trend.

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Acid-throwing is one common form of violence against women in dowry-related cases in Pakistan. *(Photo from www.pakistaniwomen.org)*

Pakistan Needs a Public Policy and Legislation against Dowry-Related Abuses

Dr. Rakhshinda Perveen

Dowry-related violence, a serious problem that affects the lives of millions of Pakistani girls and women and their children, is not seen as an injurious tradition even by educated people; and even if they are against the custom, very few dare to protest against it.

The media as well often endorses lavish wedding ceremonies and indirectly endorses the institution of dowry. Regrettably, very little statistical data is available regarding dowry violence in Pakistan. The violence and deaths associated with dowry demands constitute domestic violence, however. For example, similar to acts of domestic violence, the acts used in dowry-related offenses include physical, emotional and economic violence as well as harassment as a means to exact compliance or to punish the victim.

The most common forms of dowry-related violence are battering, marital rape, acid-throwing, wife-burning and other forms of violence. Perpetrators may also use starvation, the deprivation of clothing, evictions and false imprisonment as methods of extortion. They also often use violence disguised as suicides or accidents, such as stove or kerosene disasters, to burn or kill women for failing to meet dowry demands.

Some key challenges that I have noted after initiating different campaigns and activism against dowry-related violence include the following questions:

How can dowry be made a high priority agenda to create a critical mass to combat this institutional violence?

Are we ready to adopt this extremely critical gender issue as a passion?

Is our mass media mature enough to advocate and sensitize all stakeholders?

Do we have any political commitment in this regard, and how far are our governments ready to go in this respect?

On behalf of the Fight against Dowry Advocacy Network (FADAN), I dare to ask the government of Pakistan, all legislators, powerful donor groups interested in the development of a liberal society and elite feminists, activists and advocates of human rights and child, youth and women's rights that for how long:

Will pro-women legislation take place only when powerful elites champion the particular issue?

Will the vulgar display of wealth be tolerated in the name of dowry?

Will the “stove deaths, or kitchen deaths” of women, usually newlywed, be considered as “accidental” and not as dowry deaths?

Will dowry demands and lavish weddings be endorsed in the name of culture and custom and not considered cognizable crimes?

Will legislation against dowry and related violence be delayed? (Does it impact corporate interests?)

Will the 200 million people of Pakistan (more than 50 percent of whom are below the poverty line) continue to wait for changing social attitudes instead of proactive legislative action?

Will the State and civil society continue to disbelieve and disregard that a society without justice is a society misruled?

Therefore, a law that prohibits dowries and ostentatiousness in weddings is a must. It must touch all three forms of justice, i.e., corrective justice, distributive justice and justice of the social norms and practices of society.

Those who are against the idea and those who are sceptics make the argument that this kind of legislation would remain ineffective in a country like Pakistan. While a law never guarantees eradication of an evil, it always acts as a deterrent and demonstrates the consciousness of the State.

Meanwhile, there is at least one ray of hope: the governance action of the chief minister of Punjab in enforcing the law against lavish weddings in Punjab and his strict orders that marriage halls are to be closed by the decreed time.

Dowry is a multifaceted, deep-rooted, gender issue with social, economic and health consequences. I request all like-minded citizens, especially human rights defenders and advocates of women’s rights, to take notice of the exclusion of dowry-related violence in mainstream activism and advocacy and the apathy of the mainstream media towards the issue of dowry violence.

It remains a bitter fact that due attention has not been paid thus far to this very grave and striking human rights and women's rights issue at the policy level and the shared social and political determinants of the issues of dowry and related abuses. While dowry is practiced in many different parts of the world, dowry-related violence is most prevalent in South Asia in the nations of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

My more than two decades of work in youth engagement, alliance-building, television, radio, theater and print communication, training, research, awareness-raising and legislative advocacy has finally convinced me that my country—Pakistan—needs a public policy and legislation against dowry-related abuses to contribute effectively towards eliminating violence against women and girls and to advance the global goal of gender equality.

Strong anti-dowry legislation devised for the peculiar context of Pakistan should provide a definition for dowry-related violence. Drafters should define the scope of prohibited acts within a domestic violence framework, taking into account the dynamics of dowry-related violence.

Dr. Rakhshinda Perveen, a victim-turned-survivor of dowry violence, is a recognized researcher and gender expert who has been working against dowry-related abuse in Pakistan since 1994. She tweets @survivorwins and can be reached at dr.r.perveen@gmail.com.