Asian Peace Movements and Empire
by Muto Ichiyo

American war and its impacts

It started in a small way. In October 2001, we, a score of Asian social action groups, their coalitions, and NGOs met in Hong Kong and agreed to establish an Asian regional peace network titled the Asian Peace Alliance (APA).1 We scrambled reacting to the massive U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan We were enraged by the showering of bombs on the Afghan people by the world's richest and strongest military power. To this situation, we wanted to crystallize Asian people's concerted response.

There was a keen sense of crisis shared by all of us over the U.S. military attack on Afghanistan. Generally we were all indignant against the American arrogance to call it a war to defend civilization, disgusted with the conceit and hypocrisy of dropping "humanitarian aid" packages together with lethal bombs. We all strongly disapproved the September 11 attacks, but we concurred that the most serious danger to peace and lives of the people came from the way the United States was reacting to "terrorism."

But at that time it was also felt that organizing effective peace action in Asia vis-à-vis the U.S. war was not an easy task.

In countries with overwhelmingly Islamic population like Indonesia and Pakistan, it was Islamic fundamentalists who had promptly and visibly taken to the street shouting anti-American slogans and carrying Bin Ladin's portraits.

Friends from Indonesia reported that it was difficult to stage independent civic peace action without falling into the Bush trap, "with us or with the terrorists." Certainly the Islamist demonstration was more forceful and photogenic. Media would either identify any peace action with the Islamists or simply ignore it.

War had been brought into a series of Asian countries. Pakistani friends were then reporting that under the Musharaf regime that pledged to support Bush, rule of law had been obliterated. American FBI agents were running rampant, seven arresting any persons as terrorist suspects, including tenant farmers protesting landlords.

By that time, the war was already spread to the Philippines, opening the "second front" of the American "war on terrorism." The United States had sent its special military units to Mindanao and Basyylan islands allegedly for joint exercise with the Philippine military for the purpose of wiping out a small band of Islamist-turned bandits, whom the U.S. branded as Al Qaeda-connected terrorists.2 The whole locale was overwhelmed by massive presence of the U.S.-Filipino military, shrouding the local communities with the climate of terror. This situation created serious obstacles to the peace processes with Muslim forces promoted patiently by local voluntary groups. Yet in the fall of 2001 opinion polls showed that public opinion in Manila was still overwhelmingly supportive of Bush and his "war on terrorism."

The nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir issue was already serious and peace movements were preoccupied with it. In East Asia, the keenest social movement concern of South Korea was with national reunification, hopes for which, raised with the 2000 North-South summit, were eclipsed as Bush shifted the American North Korea-policy from normalization to hostility. In Japan, the hottest issue was the wartime legislation pushed forward

by the center-right government to break the constraints of the pacifist Constitution riding on the Bush crusade.

Situations, concerns, histories, and cultures were widely different country by country and subregion by subregion in this vast continent. Movements groups were already fully preoccupied with their respective national issues. Given this diversity of concerns and issues, what could it mean to bring into being an Asian people's peace alliance rooted in the diverse Asian realities that is capable of confronting the imperial war of global pacification? What is the new context into which Asian people, and peoples, can emerge as forceful peacemakers effectively exercising their influence on the global centers of power? Answering these questions was a challenge faced and taken by all of us.

Peace redefined

By the time APA held its founding assembly in August-September 2002, however, we began to understand what it meant to take this challenge. The contours of the imperial project in the meantime were fully shown as Bush's state of the union address early in the year made the real imperial agenda clear to all. No longer in the guise of retaliatory war against terrorism, the United States was now claiming its right to rule the world as it pleased, feeling free to name sovereign states it handpicked as members of an "axis of evil" on which the U.S. had the right to preemptively attack and destroy.

Titled "Kalinaw – Asian People Speak up for Peace!", the APA assembly was convened at this stage of the Bush war.3 Held in the University of the Philippines campus in Quezon city, northern part of greater Manila, Philippines (Aug. 29-Sept.1) drew 140 activists from 17 countries and 95 organizations. It was not a conference held in a vacuum. For months prior to its opening, the Philippines

host committee worked hard to make it an event rooted in the local movements, and succeeded. In the Philippines, two major peace coalitions had already been set up, and including them almost all major movement trends came together not only to host it but also to actively participate.

The assembly was a real activists' workshop not delimited by any institutional interests, all participants speaking up freely on an equal footing. The prevailing atmosphere was an intense urge for action in response to the actual people's needs and concerns. As the assembly proceeded, it proved to be an arena into which all the real problems Asian people suffered from were brought into, shared and thrashed out. We experienced a process in which national and local pieces fell into a full picture of an Asia placed under the U.S. Empire and its war scheme.

The assembly had three agenda items: I. The World under the War on Terrorism, II. Overcoming Conflicts and Violence among People, and III. Hopes and Strategies. Workshops (called sub-plenaries), prepared and conducted with full participation of local host organizations, examined a whole gamut of our problems: under topic I, (1) militarization, nuclearization and the role of the US; (2) war and the economy, (3) the erosion of international standards; (4) media and public discourse; under topic II, (1) Internal conflicts and peace processes; (2) gender and violence in multi-ethnic communities; (3) religion, ethnicity, and the search for peace; (4) amidst a world at war: the role of social movements.

I am not going into details of the discussion, but one thing that struck me was that we were spending very much of our time and energy, say 60%, discussing our own, meaning Asia's own, problems and issues. In other words, the second agenda item had to absorb much of our attention. This does not mean that we did not discuss the American war. The assembly did discuss it and did take a

clear position over the Bush war itself. All the speakers, analysing the post-911 situation from different angles, concurred that the Bush war was the attempt to establish imperial rule over the world. We also were agreed that violence wielded against civilian population such as the 911 attacks had nothing to do with any people's cause and only be conveniently used by the imperial center to justify its global pacification scheme. Another perception shared by all was that the Bush's global war integral to the neo-liberal globalization processes that are working social, economic, cultural, and environmental havocs on the world community, hitting its most vulnerable segments.

But there was more to it. Listening to, and participating in, the discussion, I began to ask myself, and imagine, what the scene would be if a peace conference of this kind were being held in Canada, or Australia, or somewhere in the west. Then the basis and premise of discussion, in fact the implication of the very word, peace, used would be significantly, if not totally, different. There the reasoning would be much simpler. Probably we would be discussing the American policy and "terrorism" more straightforwardly. We would criticize them against our shared criteria and values and come up with a short resolution and plan of action. There we would be grasping the war situation as external to us and responding to it to remove it. Differences of views would certainly exist but they would be resolved using the same, shared frame of reference, and the frame would stay intact. I said that the whole process would be much simpler because we would not be discussing ourselves so much as we did in Manila. We would be discussing peace, but to simplify, peace largely would mean a return to the status quo ante.

Things did not go on like that in Manila. For us who came from the vast expanse of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, a different procedure was necessary to discuss the Bush war. We had to discuss ourselves as much

as we discussed Bush. We had to go through the painful realities of the India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation, rampancy of Hindu, Muslim and other fundamentalisms and other sectarian violence destroying communities, Gujarat massacre, military repression on separatist movements, constant human rights violations by the military, police, and private agencies, economic violence wielded on the large bulk of population in the name of neo-liberal globalization, refugees of all kinds, and notably patriarchy underlying all these cruelties. In many Asian settings, vast numbers of people are deprived of peace and security. For them peace is what they badly need to create here and now and not a state that existed before but is now disturbed by what has befallen. In other words, peace means creating new relationships and situations out of the almost hopeless realities.

I know that essentially peace should be understood as building new relationships. Peace should not be a simple going back to the status quo ante but creation of new social, human, and cultural relationships, and this is so in societies of the North as it is in third world Asia. In fact, the difference between them is a matter of degree. But in actual terms the degree matters and the degree makes the approaches asymmetrical. The situation where peace should be emphatically understood as change of the status quo is certainly a negative situation for the people captive in it. But peace in our sense at once can carry a positive significance, if we take its challenge, because it involves radical transformation of societies and cultures. This, I felt, is a crucial dimension of peace often missed in northern peace movement.

The point is that the Bush war has been grafted on to this already peaceless structural setting, transfiguring it, making it more violent and repressive, and multiplying the suffering of the already suffering people. Reflecting this overdetermined complexity of Asia, the founding declaration of the APA

assembly had to be a long statement. It points out the relationship between the Bush war and Asia as follows:

In the past year, the peoples of Asia have experienced a significant rise in their already high levels of insecurity. From Korea in the East to Palestine in the West, from Central Asia in the North to Indonesia in the South, wars, conflicts, and rising tensions have been our shared reality. The common source of our heightened insecurity is unmistakable: the winds of war unleashed by the United States in its pursuit of the so-called campaign against terror. This is based on a militarism that links physical coercion and patriarchy as the currency of power.

The Bush war has conglutinated with the local fabrics to make more vicious the "already high levels of insecurity" accelerating militarization and reinforcing anti-democratic forces all over Asia. The declaration gives a glimpse into what I might call the "nexus of evil" after Bush being organized between the global war machinery and the local nodes of power. Let me quote in part.

Confident of Washington's backing, Pakistani dictator Musharraf flouts rising demands for democracy, consolidates his repressive regime, and massacres unarmed landless peasants and fisherfolk. Taking advantage of Washington's rhetoric, the Hindu chauvinist government in New Delhi labels the Pakistani government 'terrorist' in order to close off any peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue and cover up its culpability in the barbaric pogroms that its own followers have carried out against Muslims.

George W Bush's naming of North Korea as part of the 'axis of evil' has effectively scuttled the move towards rapprochement between the two Koreas and set back their eventual reunification. The US push to enlist Japan in the

anti-terror coalition has resulted in the Koizumi government compounding the violation by previous governments of the Japanese constitution by sending Japanese Self Defence forces to the Indian Ocean to support Washington's war on Afghanistan. In addition, the emergency military bill has been promoted. These moves have stoked legitimate fears of Japan's remilitarisation.

In the Philippines, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has effectively overturned the Filipino people's decision a decade ago to kick out the US military bases by allowing US troops to return in force via the Visiting Forces Agreement. In the name of the war against terror, the Pentagon has renewed its aid to the Indonesian military, an institution notorious for its violation of human rights. In Malaysia, Mahathir has been emboldened to carry out more repression under the draconian ISA (Internal Security Act).

Let me cite another case of the nexus of evil and escalation of violence under the global war on terrorism. An urgent letter from an Indonesian activist/scholar to her Asian friends tells us about the aftermath of the bomb explosions in Bali in October 2002:

This terrible incident occurred when President Bush is persuading many countries to join him to launch a "holy" war against Iraq, and unfortunately, the Bali event became food for his campaign. This event happened during the time when the U.S. and the neighboring countries under U.S. influence, had just been pressuring Indonesia to tighten its control over the radical Muslim elements in the country.

Does stopping terrorism mean increasing state repressive power? Politically there is global pressure on the Indonesian government to be more repressive. The government has hurriedly issued an anti-terrorist bill. Internationally this is

considered an important requirement to make Indonesia a safer place for entry…The Urban Poor Consortium is now starting to mobilize a movement against this bill... What many pro-democracy activists fear is that the bill will increase "State terrorism" instead.

Peace building

Building peace movement in Asia in the midst of this reality is a difficult but extremely challenging task. For peace movement as a permanent category that directly addresses global peace as exists in the west does not exist in most part of Asia (with the exception of Japan with a long postwar history of anti-nuclear bomb movement). On the other hand, there is great potential of the power of the people in Asia, whose occasional explosions from South Korea to Indonesia have brought about regime changes in the past couple of decades.

As was earlier hinted, Asian people's response to the war-making Empire would inevitably come as a comprehensive movement transforming the local and national repressive, exploitative, patriarchal, and violence-ridden relationships and at once resisting and undermining the global imperial regime. In urbanized parts of Asia with growing middle class population, traditional peace movement will emerge directly addressing world peace issues, and that will play an important role in broadening the vistas of national movements. But generally, if peace is to be redefined as the remaking of the status quo and not as the going back to some better old days, the challenge is to let emerge comprehensive Asian people's alliances resolving their issues autonomously and confronting and ultimately liquidating the global-to-local imperial meshes of power.

Why then is it peace movement, instead of general people's movement against the global regime? Because, though the naming does not matter much, it

represents intense efforts to bring into the various social movements, communities, families, and societies as a whole as well as global relations distinct elements and cultures of peace and justice – demilitarization of society, non-violent ways of resolving conflicts, and elimination of exploitative, repressive, patriarchal, and exclusivist power relationships. The APA founding declaration thus stated:

The dominant militarist statist and masculinist theory and regime of 'national security' and 'international security,' in short, must be replaced by one that is de-militarised, peace loving, feminist, universal, and people-centred.

People's Alliances for Peace

For the Asian peace movement to emerge, we are faced by the problematic well expounded by Hardt and Negri, that of incommunicability and lack of a common language. Or rather we would note that the excesses and exclusivity of national political languages, or the national perceptual frames, entrenched in Asian countries, while reflecting the historical rootedness of social movements, also can serve to narrow our vistas and prevent us from taking a whole view of the landscape unless they are encouraged to interact with one another. As some of the fixed frames I have in mind the notions of national reunification for Korea, the peace constitution for Japan, and national democracy for the Philippines. In the same vein, the Indian understanding of themselves as the world's largest democratic country, though nothing wrong in itself, seems to sometimes serve as an obstacle to imagining the world beyond the South Asian borders. These are the particular movement values and assets established through years of struggles and should not be cast away or replaced by a simple, cosmopolitan language. But it should also be recognized that these of themselves do not provide us with the basis of transborder alliances. Besides, these can keep us

confined to the bilateral interpretation of events that the United States has been conveniently manipulating to maximize its strategic benefits.

The Asian Peace Alliance will play its role in letting a new common language emerge through joint action, interaction, and exchanges as do the World and Asian Social Forum movement.

We are at the beginning of a long and challenging process of formation of global people's alliances, focusing our efforts on Asia. Under the impact of the American war with all its direct dire consequences befalling us, we have stepped into this dynamic process. Asian social movements participated actively in the unprecedented February 15 international anti-Iraq war mobilization by holding street demonstrations in a number of cities. Compared with mobilization in the West, the sizes of Asian demonstrations were still small, but as the global situation develops, we will see fresh swells of a new type of peace movement arise throughout Asia.

Notes:

1. The conveners of the Hong Kong consultation were the Asian Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) in Hong Kong and Focus on the Global South in Bangkok. Tokyo-based People's Security Forum, that had convened in 2002 together with Focus and Okinawan groups, the Okinawa International Forum on People's Security in Okinawa was also active in promoting the idea.

2. In March 2002, a 14-member Focus-APA fact-finding mission visited the war-affected areas of Basyylan and Mindanao. A full report of its findings is available from http://www.focusweb.org./

3. The full documentation of the APA assembly and its activities, including the Founding Declaration, is available from www.yonip.com/YONIP/APA. ARENA in

Hong Kong currently serves as the APA secretariat (arena@asianexchange.org).

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