

Annual Report 2017



*...from the
ruins of war*



*searching
for new
solidarity...*



Unlad Kabayan
Migrant Services Foundation, Inc.

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Annual Report

January – December 2016
January-August 2017¹

Burning issues

Wake up

There was rebellion, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). We dialogued with them, worked together for peace, mutual understanding, development. There were bands of terrorists, Abu Sayyaf. We hear about them. We also read about Iraq, Libya, Syria, ISIS, Boko Haram, the fighting and people fleeing. In different ways express our solidarity. Then they were at our doorsteps.



Marawi City Crisis

“Late afternoon of May 23, 2017, a team of police and army who served a warrant of arrest was met with a burst of gunfire. It was reported that Isnlon Hapilon of the dreaded Abu Sayyaf terrorists in Sulu, was in town meeting with the Maute Group, another band of terrorists in Lanao del Sur. Deadly fighting ensued. Camp Ranao was attacked and several buildings were occupied by militants. They burned the city jail, ordered inmates to join or die, burned Dansalan College. They took hostage 100 people.

Early in the morning next day residents had to leave in haste. The people of Marawi cannot accept what was happening to our hometown. For many years we always had fighting with Philippine military but we didn't expect that Marawi will become a battle field of local terrorists. It's like a dream that suddenly happened to our Islamic City. It is now a war zone, bombings everywhere. We don't know when we can return. And what is left of our homes.”

¹This report has more photos than previous ones. Photos provide details that words cannot fully capture. We would appreciate your comments on this new presentation.



“Our colleagues and their families were among the evacuees. We tried to contact them but with no electricity their mobile phones could not be re-charged.

Finally on June 6 we received a call from a colleague. They were in Bubong town with more than 2,000 families who fled with them. Food was running out for locals and evacuees alike. Children were hungry, weak and many were sick. Livelihood which was linked to Marawi as market was at a standstill.



Cash, clothes, food, school supplies were brought by our colleague through the long route around the lake. We were able to send a generator.

It is now past three deadlines and more than 100 days since the fighting started More than 600 militants killed, some 200 soldiers killed and an undetermined number of civilians died and/or missing, another 100 held hostage. According to the military, the fighting will end soon. But even so, the President is trying to negotiate for the release of hostages. Before him is

the massive task of rebuilding the city. For so long we experienced neglect by government, discriminated against by our neighbours, our lands taken away from us.

More crucial task is rebuilding our lives and restoring confidence in government so that this crisis is not repeated.”

ABCD friends in Australia and local groups responded to our urgent appeal and sent cash, clothes and school supplies. Our colleague came down taking the long route around the lake and took back with him relief goods with an electric generator that kept mobile phones re-charged.





Marawi is a commercial center of Lanao del Sur. Agricrops and handi-crafts from farming towns are sold in the city and goods are bought from there.

An informal-underground economy driven by smuggling, corruption and drug trade was thriving. Another important source of revenue is migrant remittances. It is what supports many families and evacuees.

With the war, this will increasingly become important for the survival of families and the rebuilding of Marawi City and Lanao del Sur.

As this is written, it is reported that the fighting is coming to an end soon. The process of rebuilding in the aftermath presents a unique and timely opportunity: to bring the poor Meranao (farmers, craftsmen) traditional leaders, women and youth in the table. And for the non-Meranao, including government, military, NGOs, civil society, to find a new way of working together that is empowering to the common Meranao.



Labor migration-where are we?

Bold pronouncements of ending labor migration to establishing a department solely for migrant workers were said before and after elections and the same are still on the table. In a show of ardor support to the President, six lawmakers have submitted separate bills in Congress for the creation of a department. But no urgency is being felt. On the contrary, certain restraint and thoughtful pauses could be discerned. “Are we finally making export of labor an economic policy?” The economic team of the administration is being asked “Can our economy grow without migrant remittances?” So far, none in the team made a straight “yes or no” answer.



Unlad Kabayan continues to be relevant in the midst of these emerging and burning issues. The macro picture has not much transformed. But significant changes have been made at the community and sectoral and household levels, including personal lives.

Vision: A people who can build their own livelihood and a sustainable economy for society.

Mission: Promote social entrepreneurship and enterprise development by mobilizing marginalized groups and migrant workers to build sustainable local economy.

Reach of Programs and Services

Program/Areas	2015	2016	Women girls	Jobs/Livelihood
Davao City	55	32	32	32
Davao Oriental	20	67	28	67
Lanao del Norte	26	143	93	143
Haiyan communities Leyte	105	77	77	77
Surigao	12	15	15	10
Metro Manila	5	8	3	6
CSI-CAP at Large	11	5	4	5
Migrant returnees/families	38	48	42	40
Marawi IDPs	--	200	HH	--
Research/CLMP - Camiguin	298	65	41	Cap Bldg
TOTAL	570	660	335	380

Undocumented Filipinos come home – (continuing from 2015)

Under the Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) program, 30 undocumented Filipino migrants arrived in the country starting March to December 2015 and were assisted for within 6 months to one year when their livelihood/income source is established. The objective was to make their return enduring and reintegration productive.



Arden Larin and wife, Joan business in T-shirt printing has a new shop in Nueva Vizcaya province. Their shop in Cavite is managed by eldest son.



Outcome/results

- 21 returnees or 70% have established livelihoods with some regularity of income and potential for growth:
 - ◊ 11 were into retail business. One retail store is now a grocery cum mini-restaurant;
 - ◊ Six were in farming and livestock raising;
 - ◊ One became a partner in a business producing industrial gloves and aprons;
 - ◊ Another resumed his T-shirt printing business;
 - ◊ Two are employed - in a department store and another at NAIA-airport;
- 9 went back to work overseas. At least 5 of them had already built their business/livelihood and need additional capital.
- Two have gone back to school.
- Two have retired and are dependent on their children for support.

Reintegration experience

- On the whole, investments in business and farms were doing well.
- Referred to OWWA National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), the government agency responsible for assisting returning migrant workers, especially those in distress.
 - ◊ After 18 months, only 10 received their reintegration assistance package.
 - ◊ At least 7 did not pursue claim due to bureaucratic process and distance to the OWWA/NRCO offices. Follow-up was costly;
- Other support/assistance came the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and Department of Agriculture (DA).



Nenita Apalla's savings, her house and a piggery.



Feedback, recommendations

- Php10,000.00 is equivalent to or less than one month salary of a migrant domestic worker. It cannot start a substantial business/livelihood.

The OWWA Reintegration Assistance increased to Php20,000.00.

- Government can use OFW reintegration experiences to identify needs and gaps in their programs and come up with more options “out of the box” support packages. It can look into viability of “Social Venture Capital” using migrants fund held in trust by OWWA. It will be a bold venture and not a “run of the mill” or “more of the same” menu.

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Empowering Women Migrant (WMW) Workers & their Families

Women Migrant Workers (WMW) Empowerment started in December 2015, a joint with the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA), Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) and Kanlungan Crisis Center, and supported by UN Women. This year, participants underwent three training and exposure events held in Davao City and Butuan City: (1) WMW & Families Rights and Welfare; (2) Entrepreneurship and Business Plan Making; and (3) Organizing & Organizational Management.



During the Entrepreneurship training, the women visited a banana chip plant in Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur and a fruit drying facility at the ISEDS Resource Center.

A Multi-stakeholder Summit on October 13, the final project event brought 60 women from Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao to dialogue with government agencies and private sector, e.g. recruitment agencies for a Multi-stakeholder Dialogue. A key issue raised had no clear answer: “What is the process of consensus building on migrant agenda? How WMW be part of it?”

Initial actions/responses arising from the empowerment project:

- a. Lizada Women’s Council conducted a rapid survey of WMW in barangay Lizada who are currently working overseas. A short manual on rights & welfare, saving & investing will be shared with them;
- b. WMW and families in Lizada will be organized.
- c. Iligan WMWs put up two businesses, one in clothing and garments and another in retail business.

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Dividends for Linamon Meat Shop Investors

In 2012, the stockholders of the Linamon Meat Corporation (LMC) made a decision not to pay dividends until their loans were fully paid. The enterprise has 420 shares of Php200.00 per share. When payment to loans were completed in June 2016, LMC announced it was ready to pay dividends, as approved by the officers and management. Total dividend pay-out reached Php111,195.00 or Php264.75 per share. Additionally, the stockholders meeting decided to review dividend policy and to look into sources for additional capital.



Lilia Apduhan, Linamon Meat Corp. manager explains the dividend policy and how it works, & happily announced that sales in the first six months reached Php1.92 million (US\$38,465.20).

Brief background: The Linamon Livestock Growers Federation (LLRF), established in 2008 is composed of 5 barangay livestock growers associations. It was an off-shoot of the livestock dispersal project in 2006 of the Department of Agriculture through Unlad Kabayan. In their by-laws was a savings component. When the idea of meat shop arose, their savings was close Php100,000 (USD2,300.00). This amount and a loan of Php300,000 started the business. The municipal government gave a piece of land where they built the shop.



Excitedly signing payment vouchers as they receive their dividends. It is their first time.



Women learn to process meat & do business



The Linamon Livestock Raisers Federation (LLRF) was able to help another group of women, the Bosque-Puracan-Robocon Women's Livelihood

Association. LLRF's application to the DOLE-Bottom-Up-Budgeting (BuB), on behalf of the Women's Association was approved.

Meat processing equipment and budget were released and the 3-day training was conducted at the SEEDS Center, March 16-18, 2017 led by Ms. Maria Lourdes Tiongco, Senior Trade Development Specialist of DOLE. At the moment, the market of processed meat is within the municipality. It needs new capital to increase production and expand to nearby areas.

Organic Fertilizer & Pesticide making

Thirty (30) farmers trained in making organic fertilizer and pesticides. Jason Arnoco of the Municipal Agriculture Office (MAO) and formerly a staff of SEEDS-Lanao, conducted the training. *BALAK* soil mix and the SEEDS Lanao coco-peat based formulation have been proven to be competitive result to higher yields compared to inorganic/chemical fertilizers.



Making organic pesticides was well appreciated by the farmers. Changing climatic conditions has bred new pests some of which are resistant to inorganic pesticides. Other pressing need of farmers is water for domestic use and for irrigation.



HAIYAN (assisted) COMMUNITIES RECOVER & ARE STRONGER

Albuera, Isabel & Palo, Leyte

Three years after Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) in November 2013, assisted communities in Albuera, Isabel and Palo in Leyte are now actively taking hold of their lives and livelihoods. Three women's organizations: Association of Empowered Women of Albuera (AEWA) Albuera, San Francisco Women's Association (SFWA), Isabel and Castilla & Anahaway Women's Association in Palo, were organized and have a combined membership of 143. They received assets/resources as part of the relief package which they used for income-generating projects and to sustain their organizational activities. Additionally, 76% of the 350 women were able to build and expand their livelihood starter packages, e.g. piglets, goats, fishing gear, seeds and farm inputs, etc. They have come stronger as a result of training and active participation in community projects. AEWA and SFWA are part of three barangay women's desks and represented in the Municipal Women's Councils. They participated in two workshops – provincial and national level – on "Access to Justice on Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights". They contributed to the "Philippine Shadow Report" sharing their stories under the section "Women in Disaster Situation".



AEWA officers regroup & plan the year's activities.



AEWA members bounced back from the destruction of Haiyan and the paralyzing fear of a big-time drug lord newly elected mayor. AEWA had actively supported and campaigned

Phebe, SFWA president reports on recent activities and financial status of micro-finance. (Below) She continues to monitor progress of Livelihood Starter Package.





Castilla and Anahaway Women’s Association, Palo run their own micro-finance program and operate a common hand tractor and mud boat. February 2016 is the 4th agricultural year since Haiyan, and the second time that farm machineries were used. Having the common hand tractor and mud boat reduced significantly the





SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Davao Oriental CocoHusk Social Enterprise (DOCHSE)



A two-day husk supply at the Bato-bato plant.

DOCHSE was able to weather the problems that came during the year. But it is not yet quite “out of the woods” so to speak. An extended dry season of 7 months starting October 2015 took a toll on the coconuts. Harvest was low and nuts were small creating a problem in supply of husks.

In June to October, Chinese traders stopped buying fiber from the Philippines because of some “political controversy”.

Both problems are now behind us but the impact on operations and finances still have to

be hurdled. Rainy season came in third quarter of the year. Chinese traders resumed buying in mid-November. In the face of these, product diversification and value-adding processes become more compelling for DOCHSE. There is an increasing demand for coco-peat from fruit plantations who expect increase in exports to China. On the other hand, mining companies are mandated to clean up their mess/mine tailings and are using cocopeat. Despite the problems, DOCHSE managed to maintain its workforce of 125.

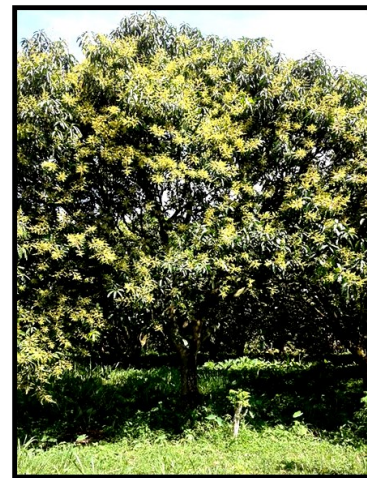


DEMONSTRATION FARMS

ISEDS Resource Center - Davao

The ISEDS Resource Center continues to be a hub of local farmers and women's organizations for replication of crop and free-range poultry production. A small group of women engaged in organic farming was organized and assisted.

At this time the mango trees are again in bloom and we cross our fingers for good weather towards a fruitful season.



SEEDS Center - Lanao

Unlad Kabayan and SEEDS Lanao has renewed its accreditation with Linamon Municipal Government. It was designated Assistant Convenor of the Mindanao Emergency Relief Network (MERN) which is currently involved in relief work and psycho-social healing of Marawi evacuees. MERN convenor is KAMAGOGOPA, Inc.

The SEEDS Manager represented the Local Special Bodies in Linamon and was elected chairperson of the Local School Board.

SEEDS Center continues to access assets/resources and create job opportunities. In 2016, five (5) families with 24 members (18 girls and 6 boys) received twining and weaving machines for making geo-net. The machines were part of the Shared Service Facility (SSF) Program of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). During the *Araw ng Linamon* (Linamon Day) celebration, the SEEDS Center Team won a carabao which is now rented out to a farmer.

Capital-Savings-Insurance/Credit Assistance Program

No loans were released during the period due to the precarious business climate for micro and small enterprises. Not a few of CSI assisted retail businesses closed down because they could not compete with malls and hypermarkets that continue to mushroom in rapidly urbanizing towns. The government, on its part, had been more generous in providing financial assistance to mSMEs in the form of loans, conditional grants and in equipment and agricultural inputs. Loan applicants were referred to the appropriate government agency and assisted in processing their applications. For instance, the Philippine Crop Insurance Program of the Department of Agriculture recently, put more resources and wider insurance coverage to small farmers and fisherfolks.

Financial performance	2016	2015
Total loans released	260,000.00	300,000.00
CSI Income	434,247.72	1,203,278.65
Expenses	386,805.00	455,129.86
Net income	47,442.02	568,436.12



The situation in Marawi has seriously impacted the CSI-Credit Assistance Program. Portfolio at risk increased corresponding to the exposure to Meranao clients. Only two Marawi borrowers came to formally request cancellation of their loans. The rest could not be contacted/located.

The site for CLMP is the island province of Camiguin with 85,000 people. It is a popular tourist destination because of its lush forests, hot and cold springs around 5 volcanoes, white sand and serene seascape, dive areas. Beyond the tourist scene, however, are high rates of poverty unemployment and out-migration. A concern of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is the high incidence of teen-age, single and un-employed mothers.

BUILDING CITIZENS' CAPACITY TO EVALUATE GOVERNMENT PROJECTS

Integral to the government's Bottom-Up-Budgeting (BuB) Program, basic sectors (farmers, fisherfolks, women, small vendors, etc.) were enjoined to conduct monitoring and evaluation of poverty-reducing projects through the NAPC (National Anti-Poverty Commission). In the spirit of transparency in governance, the Citizen-Led Monitoring Project (CLMP) provided the basic sectors with information on the various government projects and building their capacity to monitor and evaluate these projects.

CLMP covered 10 projects in 5 municipalities that were introduced to have significant impact in poverty reduction: 3 water supply/systems; 2 farm to market roads; 2 disaster reduction projects, 1 slaughterhouse, 1 pre-school and 1 special services for the elderly. Five (5) Monitoring Teams were organized composed of 20 basic sectors and 10 municipal officials. Key activities were: (a) Orientation to NAPC-BuB strategy in poverty reduction and the Project details; (b) Training sessions on objectives, principles, methodologies, instruments and outcomes of monitoring and evaluation; (c) Interface with regional officials implementing the projects; (d) project site visits; (e) Interface with community; (f) Writing of reports.



Water supply system Level 3 in barangay Quila-a, Catarman was completed on schedule. Level 3 is water supply inside houses. During the interface with communities, residents reported that the source dried up during the 7-month drought. Residents in 3 barangays had to fetch water from a common water pump downhill.

Photos: Monitoring Team member points to an excellent source of water located near the volcano. But according to the Municipal Engineer this would be a major project with much larger budget.



One project in Mambajao is a farm-to-market road (FMR) in barangay Itum-Tabogtabog . According to municipal and barangay officials, the project would ease and reduce cost by 30% transport of farm products to the market and goods from town to their homes. It would also reduce spoilage of products as it would cut travel time. Moreover, during emergency such as serious illness, volcano eruption, movement/evacuation would be faster.



Above left photo is the site of Itum-Tabogtabog FMR. Right photo shows on-going registration of Interface participants. In the background is Mt. Hibok-hibok, the most active volcano in the island.



Surprise, surprise! In the interface with communities, farmers/ beneficiaries said it was their first time to hear about the project. Local government admitted that the FMR was approved in 2014 but funds could not be downloaded because the local government has failed to submit financial report of earlier projects.



Both local government and basic sectors/beneficiaries found CLMP an effective and efficient mechanism for transparency in governance.

- 1) Bottlenecks in implementation were identified and addressed.
- 2) Built knowledge and confidence among citizens: knowing first-hand about government bodies, their functions, responsibilities, accountabilities, and how funds move, discovering “where their taxes go”.
- 3) Citizens have gained knowledge about the specifics of projects and how they can/cannot reduce poverty. “A slaughterhouse built to standard result to sanitary meat and reduce hazards to health.”
- 4) Government bodies/officials have become more responsive to communities/constituents.
- 5) The CLMP will be adopted as a regular body/mechanism with funding by at least three municipal government units.

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ADVOCACY

MIGRATION SHOULD WORK FOR DEVELOPMENT

People’s Global Action (PGA) & Global Forum on Migration & Development (GFMD)

Hosted by the Bangladesh government, the 2016 People’s Global Action on Migration, Human Rights and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) government and civil society days, on December 7-12 in Dhaka. Taking center stage are discussions on the content of the Global Compact on Migration which will be presented in November 2017.

Our proposal on the key issues that the Global Compact should take up:

- Deployment - Open more regular channels for migration;
- On-site - Benefits of on-site employment must outweigh cost of deployment;
- Return - Return and reintegration must be profitable and enduring.

Experts Group Meeting (EGM) for ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development)

Representing the migration dimension in population and development in the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) convened on July 5-6, 2017 by UNFPA and UN ESCAP in Bangkok. The EGM was tasked to identify synergies between the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 SDG Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Asia-Pacific Region. The intersectionality between population and sustainable development with migration are complex and multi-faceted.



Targets to achieve SDG in 2030 must consider the rapid changes and moving targets in many senses. Demographic changes in population as driver in migration. Increase of elderly in most labor-importing country, notable example, Japan where a fifth of its population is 65 years and older and by 2050, it will be 1/3 of total population and a negative replacement rate will create a demand for workers in labor-short industries and care workers for the elderly. Preliminary talks on this is on-going. Sending workers to Japan from the growing pool of unemployed Filipinos must not be viewed a path to sustainable development – whose development is sustained?



While poverty is become a relative phenomenon in many contexts, it is extreme income inequality that weakens social cohesion, reverses growth and pushes people to move. This target must likewise be factored in in crafting the content of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Concluding Remarks

The experience during the year had been rough. We are fortunate to get the much needed lift - people ready to work with us fanned our passion, justified anger keeping us alert, support and solidarity of our board, donors, friends and colleagues that allowed us to move with confidence. Thank you.

“The reward of good work is more work.”

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My nightmare that won't go away

On May 23, around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, we heard gunshots from afar. We were inside the school compound preparing to go home. In Marawi the sound of gunshots was commonplace. You could hear them almost everyday. Sometimes, you can hear feet running or see some people running. But mostly the fighting did not affect us, it did not bother us. It had to do with rival rebel groups, or rival clans having rido (clan war). We would just keep inside the compound, building, or in our own homes.

Not this time. The weak gunshots was followed by a volley of fire from bigger guns. Then two students of Dansalan College came shouting almost out of breath, "The Maute rebels are here!" At first we did not believe him but when the gunshots came closer and heard the clang of the school gate everyone ran to every direction to hide. Some of us ran to the end of the building and hid ourselves in a small room. We could hear the terrorists opening and closing classroom doors. From the small hole on the wall we saw some teachers being dragged out of one room and taken hostage. Inside the small room we huddled in one corner, each one quietly praying. After a few tense minutes the terrorists set the building on fire and left. Making certain that no one would see us and hoping the thick smoke would cover us from their view, we crept out and away from the burning building.

Looking around where to be safest, we heard a "psst" from one part of the wall. Four pairs of small hands frantically calling us. We ran towards them and quickly more hands appeared hauling us over to the other side. Then we all disappeared into a small opening that led to an underground room. It was almost night and the place was very dark but we did not dare light anything. During the first night nobody felt hungry or was inclined to eat. We were so scared we would and could not sleep. The owners of the house had already fled. More gunshots and running feet could be heard.

The next day instead of welcoming the morning light we sat around scared stiff. There were seventeen (17) of us, 8 females and 9 males including a baby boy, the oldest was 42. And the rest were 35 years old and younger. We had only the clothes on our backs, the contents of ladies bags and our precious mobile phones. In the daylight we discovered there was a dirty kitchen, a clay stove, some firewood and charcoal, an ice cream container with some rice in it and a small plastic pail of water. There was also a small opening for an exit that led to a platform and a small open space that may have been used to hang laundry.

On the first day we just sat around, quietly trying to feel the situation, listen to the noises outside – more gunshots, alternating with the sound of cannons. More shouting and running feet that sounded almost just next door. Then the baby started to cry and we worried. What if the cries would be heard and we would be discovered by the rebels. What then? Miraculously, the baby seemed to understand our situation and would keep quiet when we told him to. One time he must have been hungry and was crying his lungs out. We were low on water and there was none left for his milk. Then my sister remembered her small chocolate bar and gave it to the baby. That settled him.





The second night we bravely ventured into cooking porridge because we were now feeling hungry. Darkness would hide any smoke that may escape from the underground. For the next two days we subsisted on porridge. But the water was quickly running out. So I prayed for rain.

Others may have prayed for the same because in the afternoon of the third day, there was a thunderstorm. Since I was the smallest in our group, I volunteered to go out into the rain

to collect water. It was scary. What if there were terrorists around and would see me? Lucky for me, I collected a good amount of water. And there were 3 days in all that we had the afternoon rains. And our water supply was always replenished.

One rainy afternoon, we spotted a chicken all wet taking shelter in one part of the platform. With some rice, we managed to lure the chicken nearer the exit door and quickly covered it with a malong. There was a hearty meal that night and for the next two days.

Our phone communication was kept to a minimum. There was no electricity and the phones were precariously low on battery charge. We managed to contact some of our families. Some of them were also in hiding, others were able to leave earlier and reached the safety of Iligan City. Some escaped towards the towns of Ramain and Bubong. Still there were families we could not contact.

The oldest member became our leader and he was able to contact the rescue center. The center gave us information about the movements on the ground and instructed us on how to conduct ourselves so we could be rescued as soon as possible. We also gave them our location. We were told that the area was still heavily searched by the terrorists and maybe snipers posted around. Best to stay indoors and wait until some clearing operations reach the place.

On the fifth day we heard something like there was heavy fighting -- shouting, exchange of fire, rumbling of tires on the main road and even on the smaller paths. Then silence. A few hours later our phone rang and we were instructed to find an open space and wave a white cloth on a long pole for easier visibility.

As soon as the rescue team spots it, more soldiers would come to take us. With this instruction we proceeded to discuss details how to carry out this rescue plan. We chose the tallest member to go out into the street and



to wave the white flag. Sadly, no one volunteered. Each one had an excuse or two. Finally, after a long silence, I volunteered. I am the shortest adult but a long pole may overcome this deficiency. We found a white cloth, part of the blanket actually, tied together three short poles. And I was ready to march out. Then the phone rang and we were warned that it was not yet a good time. Just then we heard again a burst of fire.

It was not until the next day, in the afternoon that we were told to go ahead, get to the middle of the road and wave the white cloth and fast. I went out, my heart beating so fast I could hardly breathe. I wanted to turn back. But the alternative is a poor prospect -- longer stay in that underground without food, water. Some were already weakened with lack of food, and getting easily sick. The worse scenario could be that the Maute would find us. So summoning all my courage, strength and prayer, I went out the exit, climbed the platform, walked the open space and continued walking into the street. I was met with a stench I could not identify. It was the smell of decaying flesh. At least 4 dead bodies littered on the road as I continued walking. I looked around and hardly recognized the place. The buildings were pockmarked with bullet holes. Whole concrete walls or roofs were pulverized. It was deadly quiet. I did not notice my tears running down my face.

Then I saw a group of soldiers, a vehicle behind them. I ran towards them as they were running towards me. Then the rest of the group appeared and we walked together down the road. The baby boy was quiet and even looked solemn. We walked to our freedom.

We should have been jubilant, we were freed. We were free. But it was hard to be celebratory. There was too much death and suffering has not ceased. We will be going to the evacuation center. We will be facing new problems, dilemmas. My nightmare continues.

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