

Peacebuilding in Asia

The nature of violent conflict is changing in the Asia-Pacific region. More than a dozen countries are affected by sub-national conflicts, while conflicts between governments are increasingly rare. Many of these internal conflicts have lasted for more than 25 years, with no resolution in sight. There have been some success stories in recent years, most notably the peace agreements in Aceh and Nepal—but these cases are the exception. Why are sub-national conflicts so entrenched in Asia, and what will it take to break the cycle of conflict?



The Asia Foundation's Peacebuilding programs address violent conflict and strengthen state institutions in conflict-affected countries.

Peacebuilding is much more than negotiation. The Asia Foundation's recent studies of conflict in the region indicate that the challenges to peacebuilding are usually political in nature. Long-running conflicts are often the result of policies and governance problems that create tensions between the government and some minority groups. Common grievances include overly centralized, unaccountable government; limitations on local identity and culture; a lack of accounting for past abuses; and poor access to justice and security.

The key to breaking the cycle of conflict is to address legitimate grievances by changing the nature of governance, security, and justice in these regions. The challenge is that these reforms may be controversial with the rest of the population in the country, and may be opposed by powerful interests. The path to peace must involve a shift toward moderate politics that will allow for key compromises and reforms to take place, or pave the way for a peace agreement.

The Asia Foundation supports local efforts to improve the prospects for peace in long-running sub-national conflicts. Foundation programs support the implementation of peace processes where there are formal peace agreements, such as Nepal, Mindanao (Philippines), and Aceh (Indonesia). The Foundation also assists with peacebuilding efforts in other conflict-affected areas such as southern Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste. Working with governments, civil society, and conflict-affected communities, the Foundation addresses the obstacles to peace, facilitates Track 2 dialogues, and encourages key political reforms that will make peace more likely. Foundation programs also include efforts to reduce community-level conflicts through mediation and rapid response to impending crises.

PHILIPPINES

SUPPORTING THE PEACE PROCESS IN MINDANAO

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Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) since 2006. The Foundation believes that there is an important window for international support to the peace process that could be a major determining factor in the course of the negotiations. Greater international support to the process would help to bolster the capacity and confidence of both negotiating panels, and would help to break through the current stalemate. At the invitation of the Government and the MILF, the Foundation is a member of the International Contact Group (ICG) established through a framework agreement signed in Kuala Lumpur on September 15, 2009. As an ICG member, the Foundation has committed to strengthening the peace process and providing technical assistance to the negotiations, on request from the two parties. The Foundation's role includes providing experts on key negotiation and security issues, engaging with influential local stakeholders to encourage their support for the process, assistance to ceasefire monitoring and joint security cooperation institutions, and facilitating grassroots dialogues on the issues surrounding the peace process.

Since 2006 the Foundation has provided seed funding and advice to a broad network of civil society seeking to bolster support for the peace process through organizing and advocacy activities. For example, the Foundation supported public consultations on the peace process through the Bishops Ulama Council (BUC). The Foundation also assisted with the peace process between the government and the Revolutionary Party Workers of Mindanao (RPMM), a local breakaway faction of the

communist insurgency, by responding to government and RPMM requests for community-level projects in RPMM areas.

RAPID RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY-LEVEL CONFLICTS

In conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, violence is frequent, unpredictable, and highly localized. Violent conflict often erupts when there is an incident or unresolved dispute between local actors—clans, political leaders, military units, police, insurgent groups, and criminal networks—that cannot be resolved or mitigated through formal structures or state intervention. In many cases, small disputes can escalate into larger confrontations, sometimes drawing in the security forces or insurgent groups. The Asia Foundation has established a system for flexible and quick response funding to help support the rapid mobilization of influential local leaders and civil society groups to intervene during a crisis or when armed conflict is impending. The Foundation also supports local government and civil society in Mindanao to facilitate resolution of long-running clan (or *rido*) conflicts. Foundation partners are facilitating exchanges between feuding clans, and arranging for final settlement of *rido* through the use of local customs and practices. Since 2006, such efforts have led to the final settlement of more than 100 long-running *rido* conflicts.



For example, one of the most high profile cases of *rido* between the Tauyan and Mangansakan was resolved on March 11, 2007, in a *grand kanduli* (thanksgiving ritual

feast) marking the end of a 21-year-old feud. In March 2008, Foundation partners facilitated the resolution of the Imam-Macapeges feud, clearing the way for rehabilitation of Matanog municipality, which had been devastated by conflict in 2000.

NEPAL

SUPPORTING WAR TO PEACE TRANSITION

Since 2008 The Asia Foundation has supported the Nepal Transition to Peace Forum (NTTP), an informal platform for ongoing Track 1.5 negotiations among the major political actors, which was instrumental in the 2006 peace agreement (prior to Foundation involvement). While the peace process has accomplished a great deal, there are new challenges to its successful conclusion.

The contentious political dynamics between the CPN (Communist Party of Nepal) Maoists, the major political parties, and the Nepal Army has stalled progress on the critical issues for negotiation, including transitional justice, the management of former combatants, conflict in the Terai, and interim stability. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to encourage popular participation in the peace process to ensure greater inclusiveness and popular legitimacy in the new political system. The Foundation provides training and technical assistance to the political party Peace Units to improve their understanding of the technical complexities of key conflict issues and develop negotiating positions and policy responses. The Foundation also supports the work of the Constituent Assembly, the legislative body established by the peace agreement to draft a new constitution and form an interim government. Through the NTTP, the Foundation supports ongoing informal dialogues by the key actors in the peace process to address critical roadblocks. The Foundation has also held organization dialogues and expert visits on sensitive issues such as federalism, management of former combatants and civil-military relations.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

ADDRESSING GRIEVANCES OF THE CONFLICT-AFFECTED POPULATION

Since 2004, The Asia Foundation has supported initiatives to open the political space for national dialogue between the Thai state and ethnic Malay minority population in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand

to address the root causes of the conflict. The long-term grievances felt by this minority population have created an environment that is ripe for armed insurgent sympathy, recruitment, and community support. The Foundation supports local efforts to better articulate these grievances and aspirations of the Thai-Malay population through surveys, support for community media, Track 2 dialogues, and public debate. Asia Foundation programs seek to encourage debate on sensitive issues, such as preservation of Malay cultural identity, use of Pattani-Malay dialect, alternative versions of local history, and devolution of power to the local level. Foundation programs also help to protect the legal rights of the conflict-affected community through the Muslim Attorney Center.



NATIONAL DIALOGUES ON PEACE

The Asia Foundation is supporting influential Thai leaders and institutions to advocate for a shift in government policy in southern Thailand. With Foundation support, King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI), a Thai think tank closely affiliated with the government, organized a group of 92 influential leaders from the civil service, military, police, civil society, and media to spend a year developing strategic recommendations for peace in the South. The recommendations, released at a June 2009 conference with closing remarks by Prime Minister Abhisit, focused on urgently needed but politically sensitive issues, such as alternative governance arrangements and peace-building in southern Thailand. Following from the program, the Foundation is supporting efforts by KPI and other organizations to advance the policy

discourse on devolution of power and peacebuilding in southern Thailand. Foundation programs work with influential Thai leaders from the government and security sectors to expose them to international lessons in the search for durable resolutions to protracted sub-national conflict. KPI and the Foundation are arranging for international practitioners and experts working on sub-national conflict to visit Thailand to share their experiences.

SRI LANKA

ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

The Asia Foundation's programs aim to address the core grievances of conflict-affected communities of eastern and northern Sri Lanka, primarily through expanding access to justice and broadening the use of Tamil language among police and officials. In these multi-ethnic regions, language barriers prevent interaction and communication between local communities and government officials who are supposed to provide basic services. Increasing Tamil-language fluency among government officials can help reduce feelings of alienation among the ethnic Tamil and Muslim minorities in the northern, eastern, and central provinces, while strengthening access to justice. The Foundation works with partner organizations to help vulnerable groups redress their grievances and access the benefits, protections, and opportunities to which they are legally entitled. The Foundation is also continuing more than a



decade of support for the community mediation boards program of the Ministry of Justice. These mediation boards provide an affordable, quick, and accessible means for citizens to resolve disputes. The Foundation has helped to maintain the high quality of mediation training and supported the program's expansion in the north and east. There are now 273 mediation boards throughout the country and 5,860 mediators, all of whom have benefited from Foundation-supported training and technical assistance programs.

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