



## Workshop

### Women, Dialogue and Conflict Management

13-15 July 2007, Songkhla

80% of the population of the three southernmost provinces of Thailand – Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat – are Muslims of Malay origin. In the past, this region was an independent state and has been integrated into the kingdom over a hundred years ago. Occasional incidents of uprising against the government in Bangkok and violent conflicts were the consequence, since the central administration did not recognise sufficiently the different culture and history of the region. The latest eruption of violence since January 2004 appears to be more serious than in the past as it has been continuing for almost four years now and the number of victims killed or injured is growing daily.

Before this, both Muslims and Buddhists have been living relatively peacefully together in the same communities, despite ongoing conflicts between Muslims militants and the Thai government. Violent clashes among civilians were rare. Since 2004 this has changed: Violent incidents and attacks have increasingly led to a huge distrust among the people of the two religions. Buddhist civilians and religious leaders have been targeted as victims by Muslim militants. Many Muslim civilians have been accused or suspected by Thai security forces and authorities as potential terrorists or their supporters; at the same time, they were targeted as victims by the militants, if under suspicion to cooperate with the government.

Since the violence has been escalating, the gap between the two religions is widening. Key stakeholders in Thailand and peace activists are of the opinion that women, due to their family and community roles, have the potential to bridge this gap through dialogue skills. Dialogue is regarded as one instrument in promoting understanding between the two religions and between potential conflict parties. Therefore, in collaboration with experts on interfaith dialogue of the Centre for Peace Building of Mahidol University, FES organised two training courses for women leaders living in the affected region. The invitation went to community leaders, university lecturers, teachers, local politicians and government officials (e.g. staff of community development organisations and homes for delinquent juveniles).

FES organised a follow-up activity on 15-16 July 2007 for participants of the previous two dialogue trainings in order to assess how much they were using dialogue skills in their work and how they apply them in conflict situations. The following issues were discussed:

1. Dialogue skills have been applied by most participants and mostly in activities at the community level. The most systematic application was by one staff member of the home for delinquent juveniles who later organised dialogues for both staff and youth in the home. She reported that the youth later decided to use dialogue rather than their usual use of violent force while discussing duties shared among inhabitants in the home.

2. Currently, women have the capacity and opportunity to work for peace-building at the local, rather than at the policy level. But many reasons for the conflict were seen by the participants as policy-related, such as the misinterpretation of history by the government and the militants, the lack of rule of law and justice, the poor recognition of the local identity, the low participation of women in crucial debates etc.

Women proposed to use dialogue by:

- a) Organising dialogues with experts on the history of the region based on facts and subsequently organising dialogues with women's groups to discuss some points regarding manipulated history, which was seen as one key root of hatred and violence;
- b) Organising dialogues with women teachers and women's groups on religious teaching because some religious principles taught by male clerics were seen as selective, based on subjective interpretations and used to motivate young people to use violence; women should study the concerned religious principles in order to promote their correct meaning;
- c) Organising dialogues on the chance for women's participation in Islamic structures, which are responsible for judging family disputes, in order to improve justice for women in cases of domestic violence and other family related matters; currently only one woman is a member of the Islamic Committee of Satun Province;
- d) Promoting bilingual communication in the region because Thai authorities were seen as ignoring the Malayu language and important Muslim Malays as ignoring the Thai language;
- e) Providing more dialogue space for youth because they were regarded as under the pressure of seniors and having no voice in the family and community; this lack of space was seen as an important factor for pushing them into violent behaviour;
- f) Providing dialogues on the consequences of the use of weapons, which are increasingly owned by many people including women.

Due to the current escalation of the conflict and the attitude of the conflict parties, the first three proposals were regarded as sensitive; it was clear that any dialogue on these topics should be conducted in a conflict-sensitive way and only if not causing unnecessary harm to dialogue parties.

After the workshop the participants communicated and developed further their proposal in order to apply for a grant from the main agency working for peace building in the region, the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC). However, it turned out to be too late for the current period, since it was nearly the end of the government's fiscal year (end of September). Some Muslim participants have taken the second topic to be discussed with their colleagues, women teachers teaching Islamic studies in the border provinces. They agreed to work together and that they would submit a proposal to SBPAC in the next fiscal year.

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