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Solidarity in the pandemic

From Pakistan to the Philippines, facing the health crisis and authoritarian regimes

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The organizational mode and forms of struggle of the movements with which we have regular relations in this part of the world vary considerably from country to country. However, they are all confronted with authoritarian regimes, or even dictatorships, which are tightening their grip through the health crisis, as well as with new responsibilities towards populations whose condition has deteriorated brutally as a result of the epidemic, the negligence of the authorities, corruption, and the contempt of the elites for the working classes. Because of this, and in relation to the longstanding resistance in Burma, regional solidarity is becoming even more important. So is our support.

Responding to the Covid-19 Pandemic

In South and Southeast Asia (with the very specific exception of Thailand), the authorities have never implemented effective health policies against the coronavirus. The whole region is now living under the impact of new variants that appeared for the most part in India, including countries that managed to block or limit the first wave. Currently it is Delta, but there are others looming, which may prove even more dangerous. The financial appeals we are receiving now are aimed, at least in large part, at strengthening the logistics necessary for the deployment of multifaceted support to the victims of the pandemic - or victims of the state of emergency decreed by the authorities: distribution of essential goods (food, health, hygiene, etc.) even in remote areas, despite confinements and curfews; informing the population about the support measures promised by the administration (rights often unknown to the people concerned); facilitating effective access to official aid, vaccines and treatments, etc.

“The rich have nothing to fear”

Bangladesh, India's neighbour, has been hit hard. The farmers' associations BKF (men) and BKS (women) write that:

the situation in the country has become very alarming. No district is protected from the epidemic anymore and it is particularly severe in border areas. Members of the BKF-BKS are affected, especially in the North. More generally, containment measures are being applied in an inhumane way, with day labourers losing all income (without receiving any assistance), even tea sellers are not allowed to go out in the street: their kettles and cups are seized by the police! The rich, on the other hand, have nothing to fear; they can drive around and buy whatever they want. So this is a crucial time.

Indeed, the situation is getting worse by the day. The rate of infection is increasing in rural areas. The concern is all the greater because the rural health structure is dilapidated. In the cities, the hospitals are overcrowded. Most of the patients who die are due to lack of oxygen. There are no places available. Patients in severe critical condition queue outside the hospital. They pray that the inpatients in the intensive care unit will die so that they can fill the vacant places.

The work of Free Women in Indonesia was initially focused on defending the reproductive rights of women workers in an industrial area of Jakarta. It had already broadened its scope of intervention after natural disasters. It now informs us that:

the members of the association who are currently living in our centre [in the industrial area] are fine, but others who have rented accommodation around the factory are in a very vulnerable situation. At least 15 of our friends have had symptoms and are currently self-isolating with their families. Your help will help us to support them with food and vitamin packages.

Since this article was written, the coronavirus epidemic has suddenly worsened in Indonesia, the archipelago having become one of the epicentres of the pandemic in Asia, and the association Free Women has launched an appeal for international solidarity. [1]

“Free vaccines for all”

In addition to the above, our partners in Pakistan, a large coalition of political and social movements, launched a new federal campaign called “Free Vaccines for All” back in March and initiated a new movement that will spread throughout the country, the People’s Movement for Free Corona Vaccine. Pakistanis are now actively involved in international calls to lift private patents on Covid-19 vaccines and to build self-sufficient production capacity in the South. They contribute to regional networks in South Asia and international networks such as the Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF). Together with the CADTM, they are part of a broad call for the immediate cancellation of the debt of South Asian countries, as an essential measure for the deployment of an effective health policy.

The new pandemic wave is expected to be more deadly than the previous one in many countries in the region, while the social crisis has worsened. In general, the official number of infections and deaths per population is much lower than in France. There is obviously a bias, as many victims from working-class backgrounds are never tested (that a poor person dies is both normal and irrelevant) or die first of malnutrition, which prevents the authorities from monitoring the real evolution of the epidemic. However, it is also true that the human cost of Covid-19 in Europe has been particularly high. Official French data (not overestimated) give 111,152 confirmed deaths on 3 July 2021. This is considerable.

Total war in the Philippines

After Burma, the situation is probably most serious in the Philippines. President Rodrigo Duterte is known to have given immunity to the forces of repression, which have multiplied extrajudicial killings in the wake of his election in 2016 (probably some 20,000 deaths), all in the name of the “war on drugs”, which has taken on the appearance of settling scores and a “war on the poor”. The war against the epidemic has been part of the same repressive logic. The Duterte government’s handling of the Covid pandemic has been militarized. This logic was accentuated by the adoption of a new anti-terrorist law in 2020, followed by the criminalization of political opposition and the launch of an all-out war against the “reds” (real or supposed). After declaring that anyone violating the lockdown must be shot, Duterte ordered soldiers to finish off on the spot any “communist” injured in a confrontation. No quarter given!

Local Initiatives

The country is in recession. It is estimated that by the end of 2020 six out of ten households had gone hungry, and that more than 5 million Filipinos will be pushed into poverty if the government does not provide sufficient assistance. Faced with the emigration of health care workers, who have paid a very heavy price for the epidemic (being deprived of protection), no measures are being taken to strengthen the hospital system. The new budget maintains the policy of large-scale infrastructure works which are sources of corruption and enrichment of the rich, instead of investing in health and social services. The vaccination policy is chaotic. Concentrated in the capital region, the epidemic is on the rise and is gradually spreading to the rest of the country. In fact, experts are identifying Davao (Duterte City) as the new epicentre of Covid-19 in the country – an early warning sign that complete management of a military type will be applied in the city and a good set up for eventual control of the results of elections next year.

The population must learn to cope without the help of the administration. Local initiatives are multiplying to organize community canteens and ensure the distribution of food and aid. The Mihands coalition is involved, along with others,

in this movement. Based in Mindanao, it comprises some fifty associations, each with its own speciality, which coordinate their action to respond to humanitarian disasters of all kinds. This coalition has acquired its own dynamic and is not the instrument of any party. Its field of intervention is vast. For example, it often has to respond to an increase in the multiple tensions at work on the island, including the defence of the Lumad mountain peoples whose ancestral territories are threatened by economic lobbies (timber, mining), the army, and the militias of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the new Bangsamoro administrative entity, which has a Muslim majority. The CP (Maoist) New People's Army (NPA) itself can threaten communities that want to preserve their autonomy and do not want to fall under their command. Negotiating conflict resolution, truces or peace agreements is an ongoing emergency that Mihands tries to address as best it can.

Targets for Assassination

All organizations that have been engaged in perfectly legal progressive activities for years, if not decades, are now being singled out as targets for assassination by the Duterte regime. This is the case for members of Mihands, as it is for many others. The situation is deteriorating particularly rapidly in Mindanao, but even in the capital, the University of the Philippines is denounced by the authorities as a leftist hideout, threatened with military occupation, against academic freedom - not seen since the Marcos dictatorship. Trade unionists, lawyers, journalists, leaders of popular communities, leaders of mountain populations, defenders of rights or the environment, political opponents... are executed without trial, others arbitrarily imprisoned.

Armed clandestine movements are obviously also targets, even those that have not carried out any offensive action for ages. The Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPM-M) and the People's Revolutionary Army (RPA) emerged from the CPP (CPP-NDF). They broke away from the central party leadership during the crisis that profoundly transformed the CPP at the turn of the 1980s-1990s. Other regional structures and national commissions also asserted their independence on this occasion.

Even before the split, the regional structure of the CPP that was to found the RPM-M / RPA had learned many lessons from its experience with the popular communities in Central Mindanao, be they Christian, Muslim or Lumad, as well as from the paranoid purges that tore the Communist Party apart nationwide. They changed their programme and strategy accordingly and this evolution continued after the split. The RPM-M put the socialist perspective on the agenda (which the CPP never did). It re-evaluated, in a democratic process, the nature of its relationship with the working class in their areas of operation, respecting the decisions taken by the communities, rather than trying to impose the party's own tactical choices.

Armed Self-defence

The RPM-M understood that armed struggle was not necessarily, at all times and under all circumstances, the "principal form" of revolutionary combat. It engaged in peace talks. These talks never came to fruition, not least because it would have had to disarm, and disarmament would have meant, given the situation in Mindanao where militarized groups of all kinds (from gangs to radical Islamists) operate, leaving much of its home areas and thereby abandoning the popular communities where its members live and for whom it was an irreplaceable force for self-defence.

The RPM-M and the RPA then placed themselves in a defensive posture to the extent that their theatre of operations became a sort of zone of relative peace, compared to what was happening in other parts of the island. It was able to maintain a "non-offensive" armed force for a long time, despite numerous provocations, without disintegrating or degenerating, which is not an easy thing to do. It therefore ensured that the members of the RPM-M / RPA did not lose their social roots. The political-military experience of this movement, too little known, is full of valuable lessons.

In March 2021, in the face of the Duterte regime's merciless war affecting even the peaceful peasant communities with red-tagging and profiling, the RPM-M / RPA once again changed its orientation, calling for a people's war and reactivating their military capacity. The basis of their policy, its justification, remains self-defence, but a passive posture no longer allows them to ensure the protection of their own members, as well as that of popular communities or militant networks that were once legal but are now forced underground. This violent change in the situation shows that if the RPM-M / RPA was right to adopt a defensive posture when it did, it was also right not to disarm.

Acting Despite Threats

In no country in the region do our sister organizations operate in "normal" security conditions. Helping the poor always upsets the rich and powerful. In Bangladesh, the BKF-BKS organizations are fighting for the recognition of the rights of peasants occupying large islands that emerge in rivers. Some of their leaders have ended up seriously injured in hospital after being attacked by the henchmen of big landowners.

Pakistan in a State of Permanent Violence

The political landscape of the Pakistani left has been recomposing itself for years, with generational change, regroupments and new forms of convergence of struggles. Our historical "lineage" is part of the non-sectarian legacy of the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP). Its cadres went into exile or underground during military dictatorships, but this was only temporary. Religious (Islamic fundamentalism), social (in companies as well as in the countryside), state (secret services, army) and political violence is a constant feature of Pakistani reality. These forms of violence can be combined, as in Okara where the landowner is the army. When the peasants mobilized for their rights, they were subjected to a military blockade for months, their leaders were imprisoned, tortured, convicted of terrorism and detained in a harsh high security prison. It took many years of mobilization to get their rehabilitation - as it did for Baba Jan, a popular figure in Gilgit Balistan in the Himalayan foothills, or in the North West with MP Ali Wazir.

Pakistan is a geographically fragmented country where regionalism is strong, nationalism too (Baluchistan), and where borders are sometimes disputed. This is particularly the case in Kashmir, which is divided between Pakistani and Indian administration (not to mention the Chinese presence). The country is in a permanent state of war around the border line and the situation is only getting worse with the territorial ambitions of Prime Minister Modi in India and the Hindu far right.

One of the greatest successes of the militant left in Pakistan is that it has been able to develop a sense of solidarity that breaks down the traditional divisions in the country. It has countered repression with democratic mass mobilization and the ability to campaign in defence of imprisoned activists. It is showing remarkable dynamism in a situation that remains uncertain.

Regional Tussle Over Burma

We had no links to Burma until the country plunged into a major crisis following the February 1st putsch and the announced failure of the "democratic transition". Since then, the number of people killed by the military is approaching a thousand and armed resistance is gradually spreading throughout the lowland regions and no longer only in various territories on the outskirts inhabited by ethnic minorities.

Multifaceted Resistance

The population is also facing a new wave of Covid-19, as health workers have dissociated from the army and the civilian government's vaccination programme has come to a halt. As in many countries, the pandemic is an opportunity for the junta to try to strengthen its grip on society at the cost of the effectiveness of health policies - as in many other regimes with more or less authoritarian tendencies (including in Europe). Currently, there is no vaccination being done in the country, pushing foreign governments and embassies to procure their own vaccine for its staff and their nationalities living and working there.

The governments of Burma's neighbours support the ruling junta: Modi's India, the generals' Thailand, Xi Jinping's China... This alliance of reactionary regimes is being met with solidarity by progressive movements in the region. All our partners in the region believe that the outcome of the Burmese conflict, which is now shaping up to be long and difficult, will have profound geopolitical consequences and that the Burmese resistance must benefit from the broadest international solidarity.

The situation in Burma today is both complex and fluid, particularly in the ethnic minority states. However, important steps forward have been taken with the formation of the Government of National Unity and the People's Defence Forces (PDF), along with many uncoordinated local armed resistance groups. Thanks to our regional network of partners who can follow developments closely, we can dedicate our financial support to active resistance groups.

The Climate Crisis

A last word on the combined consequences of the climate crisis, which are particularly serious in the region, and the activation of the Pacific Ring of Fire, leading to increasingly frequent and violent typhoons, volcano eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, especially in the Philippine or Indonesian archipelagos, also threatened by rising sea levels. Much of Bangladesh is likely to be under water tomorrow. For various reasons, the Indonesian capital of Jakarta is slowly sinking and one neighbourhood after another is being submerged.

Southeast Asia is spared nothing. Humanitarian disasters (whether caused by wars, natural hazards, etc.) are cumulative and multiplying their effects to the detriment of the populations. Activist movements must respond to a multifaceted global crisis that can only get worse. They need our help to respond.

[See ESSF's call for financial solidarity towards these countries.](#)

PS:

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[1] See the appeal that this association recently launched "[Covid Emergency in Indonesia: An Urgent Appeal for Donations](#)".