

## Diary of a peacekeeper

# Working for peace while living with war

Filipino native Xarifa Sanguila is a National Civilian Protection Monitor for Nonviolent Peaceforce in the Philippines

**THE CALL CAME AT MIDNIGHT.** It was December 2015 and a family fight had broken out. A fatality had been reported. These deadly fights that can involve hundreds of extended family members are called “rido” and erupt over power, disputed land, or simply trying to preserve someone’s “good name.” With your support, we were ready to respond. By 6 am, I had joined three of my fellow Nonviolent Peaceforce team members at the site in Lanao del Sur, the predominantly Muslim province of Mindanao, Philippines.

Three hours later and there was still sniper fire. So, my teammates and I, along with others, negotiated a ceasefire with the conflicting parties: NP would be part of the recovery team to recover the body. The other side was quick to agree. The deceased was one of their relatives.

All we had to protect and identify ourselves were our vests, printed with Nonviolent Peaceforce’s logo of the three birds. But that was enough. At the end of the day, a grieving family had the body of their loved one back and the conflict ended in a negotiated ceasefire agreement with NP as one of the signers.

It had been a long, frightening day, but if we don’t do the job well, many civilians will be in danger. I feel emboldened knowing that there are people like you who believe and support in the peacebuilding work my teammates and I are doing.

Xarifa Sanguila, seen here, leaving a peace covenant in Tangkal, 2013.

### Keeping our children safe

My name is Xarifa, and my husband Musa and I live with our children in his hometown in Lanao del Norte, which borders Lanao del Sur and is predominantly Christian. We’re Muslim. We were born when the Philippines was under martial law. We have never known anything but conflict and very fragile peace.

In 2000, fighting escalated and Musa and I became very worried for our safety.

During one battle, Musa hid our small children in a school, distracting them from the sights and sounds of bombs and gunfire with chess and Monopoly.

Musa and I knew we had to take action to stop the violence. We didn’t want our children and



grandchildren to grow up witnessing the atrocities we had.

That same year, we started an interfaith grassroots peace building organization named Pakigdait, which means “reaching out in the way of peace.” We built up communities to solve issues on their own, advocated for social harmony and provided jobs for locals. When I was a Project Officer, we rehabilitated a village that was devastated from incessant fighting.

I first heard about Nonviolent Peaceforce from a coworker at Pakigdait. Supporters like you helped deploy our first peacekeeping team to the Philippines. In 2008, I joined that team because I believed that conflict could be solved in a nonviolent way through dialogue. When NP came to the Philippines, it gave me hope that they could help us achieve our dream for an environment of peace.

The team’s first order of business was to build relationships. After years of conflict, people were suspicious of outsiders and afraid they were spies. It was also difficult to make people understand this crazy thing called *nonviolence*.

After a couple years, we introduced NP to the vice chair of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. When some of his men had trouble remembering the name, he said, “Look at the logo, be familiar with the logo—three birds—and please support them. They keep our families and civilians safe.”

Because of your initial support, the birds took off. There are now two teams in Lanao, one in the north and one in the south. They are trusted not just by civilians, but by civil society organizations, government agencies, armed forces of the government, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Although it is challenging building and maintaining relationships with ever-changing military personnel, NP is always there, just checking in, asking how things are going. And when there is tension between the two groups, NP is there to monitor the situation and act as diplomat. Our presence during tense situations is only possible because of generous donors like you.

## Losing My Family Home

A 2009 agreement between the two sides, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Armed Forces of the Philippines, to resume peace negotiations, was seen as a step towards finally ending 40 years of violence in Mindanao. Regular coordination meetings between the two groups at NPs offices—with uniforms and weapons left outside—helped keep the peace process on track.

However, by 2014, rumors were surfacing that the Maute fighters were organizing in Mindanao and engaging in skirmishes with the armed forces and police. Then, on the afternoon of May 23, 2017, the situation exploded in Marawi, the capital of Lanao del Sur, and my family home.

My team members and I were conducting a training in an island province, when we heard Maute fighters



In November 2017, local officials of Lanao del Sur visited Ground Zero for the first time. It is estimated that 360,000 people were displaced by the conflict. Most of them, like Xarifa’s family, have not yet been able to return.

had ambushed an armed forces battalion in Marawi. My family home had quickly become ground zero for the fighting. This was my grandfather’s house, where I grew up, and had housed several generations of my family and where my stepmother and 10 households in this close-knit family still lived. In the center courtyard was a small cemetery where my grandparents, aunt and uncle were buried.

The nearby school was burned, and the fighters took over an adjacent house to use as a command

center. Like thousands of others who chose to leave, my family headed north, away from the fighting, some in cars, some walking. Believing the fighting would be over soon, they took nothing with them.

I made plans to meet my family later that evening. Because of your support, my team leader and I were in an official NP vehicle and we were able to provide protective accompaniment to my family's convoy, which included several Christians who were fleeing the militants.

On June 4, 2017, there was a four-hour ceasefire to allow for the evacuation of civilians. My fellow NP peacekeepers and I volunteered to lead civilians out of Marawi. Much to my chagrin, the women on the teams were told at the last minute that they would not be allowed to go into the city because it was too dangerous. Instead, we were positioned at a checkpoint on the safe side of the bridge to assist people being evacuated.

I watched team members cross the bridge just as gunfire began and violence resumed. The ceasefire had been negotiated at a high level, but troops in the area either didn't get the message or chose to ignore it. In spite of the chaos and danger, 179 civilians were led to safety and no peacekeepers were injured.

The fighting in Marawi lasted five months. On October 17, the government declared Marawi liberated. It was also destroyed. Only a few parts of the city were not bombed. I have seen drone footage of the house that once sheltered so many of my family members—it is now rubble. I'm haunted by the thought that bombs might have hit the family graves, but I haven't been back into that part of the city, so I don't actually know. While not in Internally Displaced Persons camps like thousands of others, my family is still displaced, scattered in cities around the Philippines.

### **You keep me looking forward**

Since the Maute fighters entered the picture, I've been working with NP in Yangon, Myanmar to learn another method of peacekeeping that places more emphasis on training partners. I needed a break from the challenge of direct protection work. You've supported me through the early stages of

learning about nonviolence, and I am grateful to continue learning. I look forward to returning to my husband and children yet I don't know when the rest of my family will be able to return home, if ever.

Through tears I can truthfully say that there are no words for how I want to thank the supporters of NP. Because of your efforts, civilians are protected and property saved. Regardless of how remote and inaccessible the area, NP goes where it is needed. The three birds carry more weight than I do. 🐦

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*During the Marawi Crisis, Nonviolent Peaceforce partnered with several local groups. The civilian rescue effort was coined "Joint Coordination and Monitoring Action Center." NP was the only international organization who was invited by the opposing parties. This clearly showed the acceptance of NP in the community.*



## **Your donation gives hope for a peaceful future**

**IN PLACES LIKE THE PHILIPPINES**, children grow up amidst violent conflict and war. They see violence in their own neighborhoods and schools. Trauma is unavoidable. But because we are able to work in local communities, people trust talking with us about their needs.

*When you make a gift to Nonviolent Peaceforce, you help connect people to the lifesaving services they need. Make your tax-deductible gift today.*

**For more information on ways to give, go to [nonviolentpeaceforce.org](http://nonviolentpeaceforce.org) or contact our office at 612-871-0005.**

## Threads of nonviolence weave through a fellow NP supporter's life

**SIMONETTA COSTANZO** spends a lot of her time explaining how yoga is linked to nonviolence. “The first principle in Ashtanga yoga is nonviolence. Yoga is a philosophy of life, not a religion.” And for Simonetta, this principle has been personal.

Simonetta, pictured at the cooking class excursion on the Myanmar trip.

**Fun fact** In her spare time, she loves to cook. Simonetta owned a gourmet pasta shop in Barcelona for nearly 40 years. Nowadays, her house is called “Hotel with Charm” because everybody is always there for lunch or dinner.



As a yoga teacher-turned-activist for nonviolence, Simonetta is fascinated by how nonviolence touches everything. “It doesn’t just touch politics. It doesn’t just touch a person. It’s overreaching,” Simonetta explains. “I’ve been able to work with nonviolence a lot in social situations, with issues that have come up both professionally and personally.”

Simonetta loved NP as soon as she found about it. She flew to Sri Lanka in 2006 to see NP’s first project and then to the Philippines in 2012 and saw people talking to each other nonviolently, creating relationships nonviolently, and listening to each other’s needs. She saw that it wasn’t just finding a theory about a nonviolent way forward, it was put in action. And it was not only working, but resolving things and finding ways forward. This wasn’t evident to Simonetta anywhere else.

From from 2005 to 2014, Simonetta was on the International Governing Council as a European representative to grow support for NP. During those years, Simonetta witnessed a culture of innovation and adaptability. “I saw an immense capacity to try new things, to keep them as aligned

as possible to our mission and vision and the constant adaptation to needs as they came up,” says Simonetta. “I would say, without a doubt, NP is an organization that’s demonstrated very important ways forward in conflict transformation.”

Simonetta recently went to Myanmar with a group of NP supporters to experience and learn about our work in the country. Upon her visit, Simonetta was surprised at how the changes in technology enhanced the work of nonviolence. In Sri Lanka in 2003, there were either satellite phones, or nothing. But she was pleased with the changes brought on by 15 years passing. There is a lot more capacity today to react to situations immediately because of advances in technology. “I imagine rumor control is a lot faster than it used to be,” Simonetta shares, “it used to be ear to mouth, now it’s What’s App!”

### Youth give her hope for the future

Simonetta was also impressed by the way youth reacted to conflict in Myanmar. She found that they were prepared to work on solutions, taking ideas from previous generations, adapting them and putting them into practice. It moved her deeply to see their commitment and maturity to solving problems through nonviolent theory and practice.

Her hope for the future: “We’ve demonstrated that this work in nonviolence can be done unarmed. But now there’s a need to relay to other people what NP has done. This work has to grow, be better known, better understood, and continue.”

Like you, nonviolence has played a key role in shaping Simonetta’s values and beliefs. In moving forward, you and I can continue to relay our stories of transformation to bring the social change the world needs to see. Thank you for your support. ➡

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*Currently, Simonetta is chair of the board for NOVACT—International Institute for Nonviolent Action, an organization which guides nonviolent movement for social transformation both globally and locally in Catalonia, where Simonetta resides.*