

## MSU-GenSan prof speaks at Harvard University Policy Forum

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (MindaNews/01 Feb) -- Rufa Cagoco-Guam, associate professor of the Mindanao State University & General Santos City, and director of the university's Center for Peace and Development Studies, was among four women peace advocates and activists who spoke at the policy forum held at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, on January 14.

The forum, moderated by Ambassador Swanee Hunt, had three other panel members -- Orzala Ashraf, a humanitarian aid worker and woman activist from Afghanistan, Marini De Livera, a lawyer and women advocate from Sri Lanka and Josephine Abalang, a parliamentarian from South Sudan. The audience consisted mainly of Harvard University Kennedy School of Government faculty and graduate students, policy makers in the Boston and Cambridge areas, and some civil society leaders. Ms. Hunt used to be the American ambassador to Austria from 1994 to 1997, during the administration of President Bill Clinton. In this capacity, Hunt initiated the series of peace negotiations between the warring parties in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The forum's theme revolved on the question, "Will Pres-elect Obama's foreign policy be inclusive?" Or will the newly elected US president be more attuned to including women at the forefront of decision making especially in peace and security issues. Initiating the informal conversation in the forum, Ambassador Hunt introduced the panelists and their roles and work experiences in peace processes in their respective countries. She also informed the audience that the four women panelists are part of a group of 19 women leaders from 12 conflict-affected areas in different parts of the world who have been invited to the 10th Annual Colloquium sponsored by the Institute for Inclusive Security. Among the highlights of the forum were remarks from each of the panelists on their experiences as women peace advocates and development workers. Sudan's Ms. Abalang described her flight to escape armed men at the height of the conflict in Sudan and how it changed her life completely. Her flight out of Sudan brought her and her family to Canada, where she has become a naturalized citizen. But two years ago she decided to go back to southern Sudan to help her fellow women, especially in rebuilding her country after having been ravaged by war. Ms. Ashraf narrated how one of her staff had decided to wear his dead brother's clothes and disguise herself as a man in order to work and be allowed some freedom (especially to study) after recovering from the ashes of war during the Taliban regime. Ms. De Livera, an attorney who works for the Women's Ministry in Sri Lanka, expressed her frustration at the exclusive and gender insensitive policies of the current administration there. According to De Livera, the Women's Ministry is just established as a token & it is not provided both financial and logistical support to pursue gender empowerment for women in her country. For her part, Prof. Guam noted that since peace is a collective concern, the tedious work towards attaining it should include all sectors of society. She decried the utter disregard of including not only women, but also their agenda, in the two peace processes in southern Philippines. She said that the Philippines is the only Southeast Asian country that has the distinction of electing two women as presidents, and the two won after their discredited male predecessors. But, this does not mean that the Philippines has become more inclusive in its policies, especially in peace and security issues. "It's not enough that we put a woman in a political position, because it doesn't necessarily follow that a woman brings with her the concerns of women. Often, they are just following in the footsteps of husbands or fathers, to keep the dynasty going." She also noted the critical role of the media in promoting and sustaining peace in society, as she described her former work as editor-in-chief of a community paper in Mindanao. When asked by one of the audience on what motivates her in her work for peace, Prof. Guam described images of pain and despair among many populations in Mindanao which have seen repeated forced migrations due to armed conflict. She noted that though "work of peace is long and tedious and we may not see the fruits of what we are doing in our generation nor in that of our children, we know we cannot give up." Regarding the forum theme, the panelists were one in saying that president-elect Obama's foreign policy will be welcomed with much anticipation for a more inclusive framework for dealing with America's allies and even its severest critics. However, there is still apprehension, especially among civil society in Afghanistan, according to Ms. Ashraf. The Institute is a non-profit organization established by a charity founded by Ambassador Hunt and her family, the Hunt Alternatives Fund. Their head office is in Washington, DC. The first part of the colloquium was the Executive Education course in Harvard's Kennedy School of Government where the 19 women participants presented their respective work and country situations to the graduate students and faculty members. The second leg of the colloquium included sessions on policy advocacy strategizing and interacting with top policy makers in Washington DC, including, among others, US foreign relations advisers, state department officials, leaders of donor agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank. Prof Guam is one of the two Philippine delegates to the Colloquium; the other one is Dr. Gloria J. Mercado, a senior fellow at the Development Academy of the Philippines and an adviser to the National Security Adviser, Norberto Gonzales. (MindaNews)