

Philippines' Notre Dame College Has A Student Body That's 70 Per Cent Moslem

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SULU, Philippines (AP) —
Notre Dame College—the Notre Dame of the Philippines, that is—has 800 students. Of these 70 per cent are Moslems, but no one is trying to convert them to Roman Catholicism.

That's now it is in the Philippines' southern islands. Still, violent clashes near Cotabato—at the heart of Moslem country—are now threatening the example of coexistence between Islam and Christianity.

Last week nearly 6,000 Moslems were on the streets of Jolo, ancient seat of the Sultan of Sulu, to express sympathy for brothers in Cotabato where armed conflict has killed an estimated 1,000 persons since July and caused many thousands to flee.

Vehement

"Some speakers at the rally were pretty vehement," says one Catholic Filipino close to the community. "It's a warning, a red light going on."

The Oblate Fathers who run Notre Dame say they are not alarmed, however.

Under the late Bishop Francis McSorley of Philadelphia, the Oblates built in Sulu Province seven high schools, three colleges, four airstrips, a hospital, a community center-gymnasium. They also founded a non-religious weekly newspaper.

At the Oblate high school on the remote island of Cagayan de Sulu, the Rev. Raymond Lacasse of Woonsocket, R.I., has 150 students—all but about 25 of them Moslems. In all schools, only the Catholics—and a few curious Moslems—study the Catechism.

"We don't proselytize," said the Rev. Gerard Rixhon of Belgium, senior priest at Notre Dame. "We don't want to."

Never Won Over

The Sulu archipelago is 95 per cent Moslem, and Spanish colonizers in nearly 400 years of effort never won over the people.

As a whole the Philippines are about 85 per cent Roman Catholic. The Moslems are a minority of three million to four million.

Christians often look down on Moslems as backward, and some Moslems consider Christians as inferior for not resisting

conversion as they did.

The Cotabato killings are heavily laced with this antagonism although the causes reach to land disputes, banditry and politics.

One factor is an increasing awareness of Islamic teachings and a faint new militance. A congressional survey found most Filipino Moslems ignorant of their religion during the early 1950s, but that is changing.

The Egyptian Embassy in Manila says that since 1962, 30 teachers from Cairo have come to the southern islands, and 1,000 Filipinos have studied in Egypt.

Conversions on both sides cause occasional ripples, but they are rare. When the son of the Moslem spiritual leader of Jolo's largest mosque switched to Catholicism, it took long arguments for him to win approval from the Catholic hierarchy.

In Zamboanga, a Christian stronghold in the south, a young law student who became a Catholic in the '50s is now a city councilman.

"My father threatened to kill me," Pelagio Mandi recalls. "My uncle wouldn't speak to me for 10 years. Now they have forgiven me."

His children kiss their grandfather's hand on Moslem holy days, as custom dictates, and the Moslem Mandis gather at the councilman's home in Christmas in the festive mood many Moslems here show at yuletide.

The problem, Mandi says, is that since the Spanish time Moslems have been placed in the category of "Moro," connotations of backwardness and rebellion. Resentment against government treatment has cost dearly. Operations against the Moslem bandit-warrior Kamlon in 1949-55 took 5,000 troops. Some 500 persons were killed, 200 homes and a mosque were destroyed.

Kamlon served 14 years awaiting execution but was pardoned, and he lives quietly near Jolo in his old age. Mandi says the Kamlon operations should have shown the government the need for change.

"I am proud to say that I am a Moro," Catholic Mandi adds.