



Title Eleven young Moro and indigenous peoples leaders are flying to the United States to participate in a 3-week exchange program entitled "The Past is Always Ahead of Us: Empowering Minority and Indigenous Leaders in the Southern Philippines." Supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US State Department, the International Training Office (ITO) at Northern Illinois University (NIU), the International Visitors Program Philippines Alumni Foundation (IVP-PHILS.) and Tuklas Katutubo developed a comprehensive multi-phased exchange program designed to enhance the capacity of these young community leaders from minority/indigenous communities and engage them in examination of programs and practices that facilitate integration and empowerment of minority populations in the Philippines and in the U.S. In particular, this program will look at issues related to the social, political and economic integration of immigrant and minority youth populations and the challenges they face in mainstream society, including access to education and maintaining ethnic identity within a multi-ethnic society. The program will offer an overall comparison and sharing of best practices in the U.S. and in the Philippines on these issues, including an overview of the range of historical and current experiences with integrating immigrant and minority citizens in each country and analysis of the interconnecting role of government, NGOs, faith-based and immigrant organizations, educational institutions, and the media. From almost 200 applicants from Mindanao, only 24 participants were selected, half of them women, representing various Moro and indigenous peoples tribes. Prior to their trip, they attended a week-long pre-departure orientation which included their visa interviews, a tour of the US Embassy and a short meeting and photo opportunity with Ambassador Harry Thomas Jr. Further, they had sessions on the status and challenges of integration of Moros and IPs in the Philippines and EQ and stress management and traveling tips. A session on creative brainstorming proved very useful as they will each be given a mini grant of US\$150 upon their return to implement their community projects. These project ideas will further be enhanced and developed while in NIU. Meetings with the Office of Muslim Affairs and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples and a visit to the Anak ng Mindanao Party List office at the House of Representatives were also done to initiate their networks. I had the pleasure of speaking to two of the participants. One of them is Marjana Imran, a Tausug. "I love Jolo. I will definitely go back," Marjana exclaimed. After experiencing two years in Saudi Arabia as an OFW, she realized that she does not belong there and would rather stay in Jolo. She characterized her stint in the Middle East as both good and bad. Working abroad is good because it allowed her freedom and self-reliance while the bad part was being away from her parents. To her earning big bucks is not important. Being a disc jockey in one of only two FM radio stations there, this Tausug believes that significant change must come from oneself. That is the reason why she loves to do fundraising activities through her radio program. Because there are no malls or any major entertainment activity there, Marjana raises money for her pet projects by organizing "gimmicks" like singing contests and fashion shows featuring clothes made of recycled materials through the sale of P10 tickets. Another participant is Benedicto Angonia, a Tagacaulo from Sarangani Province, who established their barangay school using indigenous materials without funding from external sources. His community is 20 kilometers from the national highway and can be reached by a 10-hour hike. He has about 100 students in grades one and two with ages ranging from 6 to 17. He teaches English, Pilipino, Makabayan and Mathematics. He relates that the children would normally walk 2 hours just to reach the school. Thus, school hours are limited to only 2-3 hours a day. Most of the time, he feeds his students as most of them come to school hungry. His dream is to build a concrete version of the school when given enough funding or earning enough income from his livelihood activities. He is the son of the tribal chieftain in his community and supports his family and community service activities from his modest farm produce. Even though I am not participating in the exchange program, the week spent with them has given me a most unique learning experience. My interactions with them have given me a clearer vision and understanding of their cultures and the differences that I once thought are there have now been transformed. by Annabelle Plantilla