

Savage horse-fights, though illegal, are popular entertainment in the Philippines. **Stanley Johnson** witnesses the cruel spectacle. Photographs: **Andrew Plumbly**



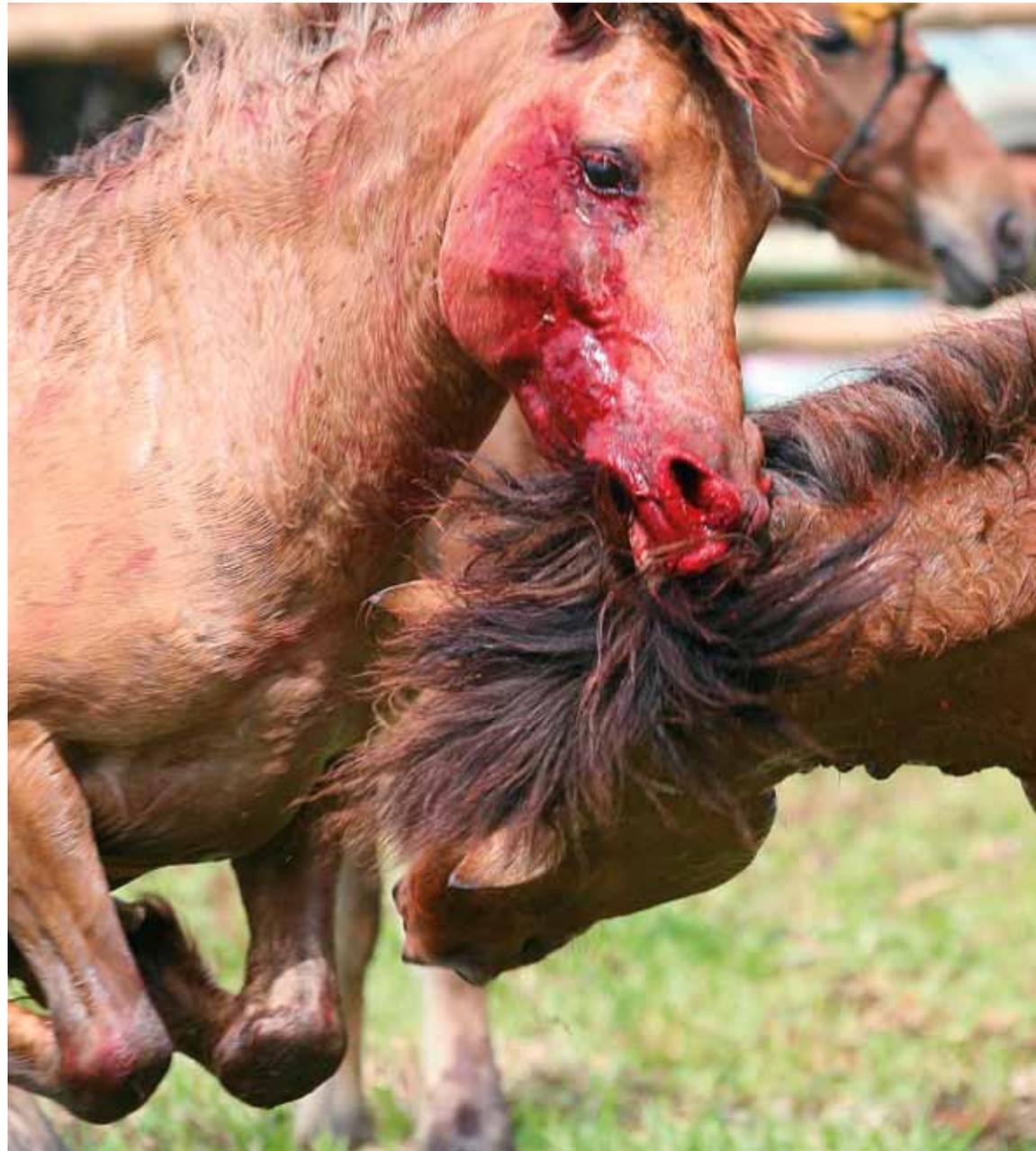
BRUTALITY AN

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n the surface, it seemed a good morning to be leaving Manila. Huge crowds were gathering for the Black Nazarene Festival, a Catholic procession in which barefoot men carry a statue of Christ through the streets, and President Aquino had warned of a possible terrorist attack. Yet, as I caught the mid-morning internal flight to Cotabato City, I wondered if I was leaping out of the frying pan into the fire.

In theory, horse-fighting is illegal in the Philippines, but fights still take place in Mindanao, the country's most

turbulent and violence-prone province. "They are truly horrific," Andrew Plumbly, the 44-year-old Canadian who runs Network for Animals warned me. In some areas of Mindanao, he said, kidnapping was part of normal money-making activity. Local businessmen were mostly at risk. But there was a political element too as separatist groups, particularly Abu Sayyaf (a militant Islamic guerilla organisation), looked for high-value targets such as foreigners, demanding huge sums in ransom. ►►►



D THE BEASTS

“Starting offers can be above \$20m,” he told me. “If they don’t get what they want, you’re liable to be beheaded.”

I had already looked at the Foreign Office’s website. While all travel to Mindanao was strongly discouraged, some areas were strictly “off limits”. All of this gave me pause for thought. My wife told me that she certainly wasn’t going to sell the house to get me out of trouble. I rang the bank to warn them, though I was not particularly optimistic. RBS has enough difficulties of its own nowadays.

I still hadn’t made my mind up to go when Andrew telephoned. A horse fight was definitely going to be staged in Mindanao. The bad news was that it would be in one of the most high-risk areas: near a town called Midsayup in North Cotabato Province. “Can we at least get a bodyguard?” I asked.

Dino Yebron, one of the charity’s volunteers, meets Andrew and me at Cotabato airport and whisks us to his car. A 62-year vet and former university professor, Dino has, brilliantly, arranged for two bodyguards, not just one. Tem and Nilo are standing by the vehicle, toting innocuous-looking travel bags. As we set off, all five of us in the chunky Toyota, Dino tells us the guards are both policemen. The reason they are not in uniform is simple: uniformed police carrying guns are themselves a target. “The separatists will attack you just to get the weapons,” he says.

Cotabato City is no place to dawdle. It’s not just a question of kidnapping. Violence, whether random or premeditated, is the norm and you don’t want to stick around to find out which version you are dealing with. In any case, we are in a hurry. Dino’s scouts have informed him precisely where the horse fight is being held and it is well over an hour’s drive away. “They started this morning,” Dino says. “In one day there may be 13 or 14 fights.”

Dino puts his foot on the pedal. We don’t want to miss the fight after coming all this way. But the state of the road is atrocious, with numerous one-way sections where traffic comes to a standstill. Then there are the checkpoints. In spite of — or possibly because of — the difficulties and dangers of his job, Dino has a highly developed sense of humour. “They call them checkpoints,



but there are times when they don’t accept cheques, they want cash. So we call them cashpoints instead!”

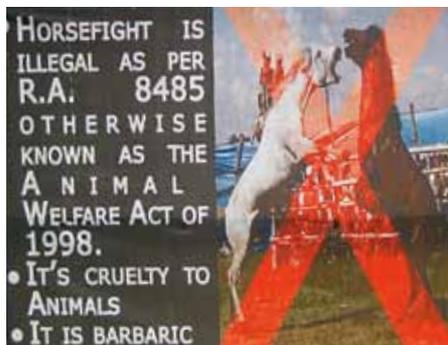
We have been driving for 50 minutes when Dino points to a turning. “That’s where the massacre took place. A few months back, 57 people were killed in one attack, including journalists. The mass grave was already prepared. They pushed the bodies and even the vehicles — over 10 of them, cars, vans, SUVs — into the hole, then back-hoed the earth over it.” I wouldn’t say I picked up every nuance of the story, but I got the gist. Maguindanao’s incumbent provincial governor apparently resented being challenged, so he arranged for his rival’s campaign entourage, which included the man’s wife and relatives as well as journalists and other supporters, to be “rerouted” into a deadly ambush.

Dino tells us the governor lost the

election and the rival won, but the (former) governor’s trial has not yet taken place. He shakes his head in wonder. “How did they think they could get away with it?” I surreptitiously check my passport, hoping it doesn’t reveal my new career as a “journalist”. Phew! I’m glad to see that the new EU passports don’t ask you to state your profession.

We are less than five miles from a town called Midsayup when we see flags flying and banners waving and hear a running commentary blaring over a loudspeaker. A huge sign depicting two rearing stallions engaged in mortal combat waves over a makeshift arena. Two or three hundred spectators are pressed up against the railings. This is clearly a great family occasion. Young and old, men and women, have all turned out.

Police are present in case of trouble. Horse-fighting may be banned by law, but the spectacle we’re about to witness has been licensed by the mayor of Midsayup. The local constabulary is present to see that things don’t get out of hand. We park the car. Nobody pays us much attention. They are too busy concentrating on what is going on in the arena.





SHOW TIME: a horse-fighting derby in the Philippine town of Midsayup (left) draws hundreds of spectators (below). Bottom left: a defaced poster from an animal-rights group. Bottom right: stallions engage in vicious attack



HORSES REAR, GOUGE, KICK AND SLASH, COMPETING FOR A MARE



Someone offers me a chair to stand on so I can look over the heads of the crowd.

The scenes I witness are almost surreal. Inside the ring, two stallions, lathered in sweat and blood, fight each other to a standstill. They rear, gouge, kick and slash, competing for a tethered mare. At times they come to a trembling halt and almost nuzzle each other, before launching once more into a horrific attack. At other times, they race around the arena at full speed, causing the officials to slip quickly under the railings out of harm's way.

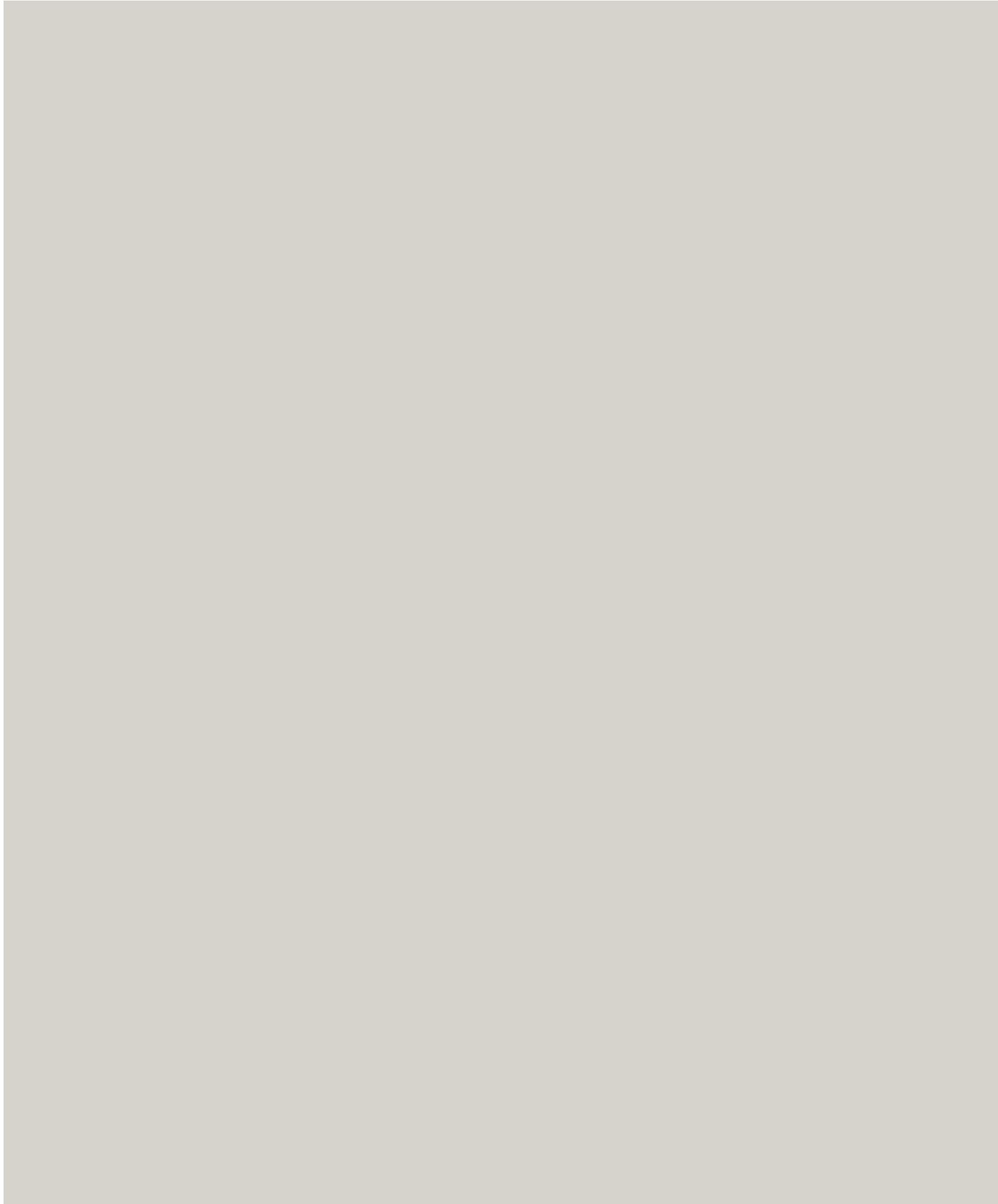
For the most part, the stallions entered in these local "derbies" are not reared as fighters. They are animals which, when not fighting, are used as beasts of burden or as a means of transport. The spectators are deeply involved in the fight — they are "*aficionados*". But the reason these fights continue to take place lies in the money that changes hands. The owner of a winning horse will earn a tidy sum; if he has several winners, claiming the title of "derby champion", he will gain a small fortune. But even more important are the spectators' bets. Markers — *cristos*, as they are called — make a mental note of the wagers shouted out from the crowd as the fight runs its course. For a

few minutes at the end, the exits are blocked so that bets can be collected and money paid out. Police are on hand to ensure there is no violence, but also — perhaps more importantly — to see that nobody slips out of the venue without paying up.

The horse fight we watched was the last of the day. By my watch the two stallions in the ring fought each other for more than 40 minutes before one was declared a winner. The rules are precise. If a stallion fails to challenge his opponent, he can lose a point. If he runs for the exit chute, he can also lose a point. Once he loses two points, the other horse wins. En route to the verdict, there are lashings of blood and gore. One horse may gouge the other's leg or testicles. He may bite the other's neck and sides. No, it is not a pretty sight.

Dino, with his long veterinary experience, is as much concerned for the welfare of the mare as for the stallions. "That mare," he says, pointing to a quivering animal roped in the middle of the arena, "has been out there in the sun all day. There may have been 10 or 12 fights. She'll have been mounted as many times. That's the winner's perk. You might say she's gang-raped. And she'll also be bitten, scratched and kicked as the stallions fight it out. There's nothing noble or natural about the horse fight. This is a purely induced anger."

As Andrew and I stand there among the crowd, absorbing the spectacle, we encounter more than a few curious glances. Few, if any, European or American faces are seen at these underground events. But Dino has prepared a cover story. After the last fight of the day is over, he introduces us to the referee and other officials. "Meet Mr Johnson," he urges ➤➤➤





OUT TO GRASS: A traumatised stallion after the fight (left). Bottom: a winning horse mounts his prize

them. "He's a big businessman from America. From Texas! Soon he'll be introducing horse fighting in the rodeos over there!"

I do my best to look the part. "Y'all have a great day," I say, doffing my hat.

When it's all over, we wander through the paddocks to inspect the winners and losers. There was a time when Dino would use his veterinary skills to patch up any obvious wounds. He doesn't do that any more.

"I don't want anyone to think I'm here to keep them in business," he says. "My job is to work with the local communities, with the mayors and police departments, to persuade them to enforce the law. We have succeeded in some provinces, but there is still a long way to go, particularly in Maguindano and Cotabato."

He walks over to one of the stallions that has fought and lost this afternoon. The animal is lying down on the grass. There is blood on its flanks and its nostrils are badly torn. Dino looks at the beast with a practised eye. "There is an internal injury, I am sure of it. Within two weeks he'll be dead from that, or else the owner will have slit his throat."

Later that day, still accompanied by our police guards, we drive into the town to check into our hotel. The streets are arrayed in festival bunting and the crowds are out in force. The hotel costs us about £10 a night each. The two policemen join us for dinner. As we sit at the table, one of them, Tem, opens his tote-bag and shows us his weapon, a Walther PPK. I am curious. "If your gun is in the bag," I ask, "how do you get it out quickly enough if someone stops us at a road block and threatens to shoot us?" Tem smiles, but doesn't answer. He is obviously quite capable of shooting through the bag. Fortunately, at least while he is with us, he doesn't have to put his skills to the test.

It has been a long day. There is no window in my room. We have, perhaps unwisely, agreed that our escorts can go back to the police station for the night to get some sleep,

'THERE'S AN INTERNAL INJURY. WITHIN TWO WEEKS HE'LL BE DEAD'

so I wonder how I'll escape if gunmen come banging at the door. I try to put a chair under the door-handle but it doesn't work. Either the chair is too small or the handle is set too high in the door.

Around 5am the next day, we pile into our vehicle to call on the local congressman. He has been Dino's friend for more than 30 years and used to be mayor of Cotabato City, then governor of the North Cotabato province. He has been here 50 years, with a farm in the heart of the town (the town has, literally, grown up around him). We pass through the security gates and drive down the track to his house. Cocks are already crowing and the light is breaking through the coconut and durian



trees. The congressman gives me his card. It reads "Rep, Jesus Jesus N Sacdalan, 1st District, North Cotabato". "May I call you Jesus?" I ask. "Please call me Susing," he says to me. "That's the name we use here. If people call me Jesus and hate me, they may hate Jesus too."

We spend more than two hours with the congressman, starting with strong, sweet coffee on his terrace before a tour of his farm. He has nurseries full of plants which he hands out to help local farmers. The whole system is organic. The grass under the fruit trees is cut to feed the cattle and the manure is returned to the soil in the orchard.

"Susing" Sacdalan is one of the key political personalities in the Philippines. He is chairman of the congress's Special Committee on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity. Not long ago, he successfully appealed to the supreme court, arguing that former President Arroyo's government had acted unconstitutionally in its negotiations with the Mindanao rebels and separatists. "I do not see this as being a fight between Christians and Muslims," he tells us. "It is a question of poverty. The people of Mindanao need to feel they have been justly treated. Development will bring peace."

He also sees the issue of horse fighting in developmental terms. If the political problems of Mindanao could be sorted out, there would be a brighter economic prospect ahead. The extra income earned by horse-fighting might become less important. And with a peaceful settlement between warring factions, the government would be in a much better position to enforce existing legislation.

Later, on the plane to Manila, I read a headline in the Philippine Daily Inquirer. The vice-mayor of Cotabato City, Muslimin Sema, had been gunned down by political opponents, suffering multiple bullet wounds. President Aquino had ordered the police to hunt down the perpetrators of the shooting, which had occurred about an hour after we left Cotabato for the horse-fight. The paper didn't say whether Mr Sema's bodyguards were in mufti or in uniform ■

For more info about Network for Animals visit www.networkforanimals.org. *Where the Wild Things Were: Travels of a Conservationist*, by Stanley Johnson (Stacey International, £9.99), is published on July 18. It is available at the Bookshop price of £9.49, inc. p&p. Tel: 0845 271 2135