



Peace Monitor

ALTERNATE FORUM FOR RESEARCH IN MINDANAO, INC.

3rd and 4th Quarter of 2010

"STAND still in the long road to PEACE."

"The path to peace will be long and challenging". This is how the returning Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, Teresita Quintos-Deles, describes the quest for peace in the country (OPAPP, 2010a).

In Mindanao, this path is very much similar to the many rural and urban roads in this troubled land. Long, winding, bumpy, dusty, and littered with the ubiquitous checkpoints and annoying chokepoints.

Yet, there are also hopeful signs along the road to peace such as the milestone involvement of women in peacekeeping and the voices from many sectors pushing their stake in the quest for lasting peace in Mindanao.

Starting on a hopeful note

The journey for peace under the new administration of President Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III started on a hopeful note. One of his first key appointments to the cabinet was peace advocate Deles to take her previous post as peace adviser in Malacañang Palace. By mid-July or barely two weeks into office, the new president has named the new government negotiating panel for the resumption of talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led by University of the Philippines (UP) College of Law Dean Mario Victor Leonen.

In a positive response, the MILF has also named its panel composed of members from the previous talks and new members, including a board of consultants composed of indigenous peoples, Islamic theologians, and breaking from tradition, women representatives.

President Aquino outlined his administration's commitment in his Inaugural Speech on 30 June as well as in his first State-of-the-Nation-Address (SONA) on 26 July. He reiterated the same message in a number of occasions to emphasize the seriousness of the new administration to forge a peace agreement during his 6-year term.

New GRP Panel Members:

Dean Mario Victor Leonen, Chair

Miriam Coronel-Ferrer

Senen Bacani

Upi Vice Mayor Ramon Piang, Jr.

Dr. Hamid Barra

New MILF Panel Members

Mohagher Iqbal, Chair

Datu Michael Mastura

Maulana Alonto

Ahboud Syed Lingga

Abdullah Camlian

Datu Antonio Kinoc (Alternate)

On the occasion of the 7th Peace Consciousness Month on September, President Aquino reported: “We have finally embarked on a journey of transformation – and this is a journey that necessarily entails the active involvement of every Filipino... Together, let us break barriers and foster gains that will surely be remembered in the next peace months to come.” (OPAPP, 2010b).

No gain but standstill in six months

Yet, six months into Aquino’s watch, there was little, if no progress at all, in the resumption of the peace journey. A number of issues have snagged the resumption of the talks to a standstill, principal of which was rather procedural than substantial, that is, the third party facilitation.

The first indication of the resumption of the negotiations was when the President confidently announced during the SONA that talks would resume “after Ramadan.” The Muslim fasting month ended on 9 September, or seven weeks later, but the panels have not met.

In another announcement, the government said the talks would resume in October. Again, the whole month whisked by like an express bus but without the panels on board. More dates were mentioned for the month of November and yet again, the panels have not sat down for either an informal or formal meeting, even a chair-to-chair face-to-face dialogue.

As early as August, the MILF has already raised doubts that talks would resume as soon as possible. This indicated that in spite of the seeming willingness of both parties and the opportune moment presented by the start of new and popular administration, the road to peace would be a difficult and arduous one.

Facilitation issue sidetracks panels to meet

What kept the two panels from sitting in the same table or riding the same vehicle for this journey was the issue on facilitation and facilitator. Without the “driver”, the “peace bus” would simply not move.

But with the issue on facilitation and the Malaysian facilitator out in the open, debated in the media and cyberspace rather than in the negotiating table, former government chief negotiator Jesus Dureza lamented the “mistake.” He wrote in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on 21 November that the efforts to restart the peace talks were off to a “bad start” with the obvious washing of dirty linen in public.

Dureza opined that matters like these are “discussed behind closed doors without embarrassing or putting on the spot persons or institutions involved” (Dureza, 2010).

The controversial issue may have started unintentionally when Leonen addressed the National Solidarity Conference for Mindanao held at his familiar grounds at the UP Diliman campus on 13 August. Like a veteran university professor, he was straight forward in commenting “I do not think that this new administration and this newly appointed negotiator can be faulted if we seek to review the terms of reference of the facilitation of the past discussions.”

He stressed that “any good negotiator knows that attention to the process of the negotiations is as important as the substance of the conversation. We do not want the process to dictate the substantive agenda. We want the process to facilitate it. And the process includes the level of comfort that both negotiating panels have in relations to the parameters of the talks.” He suggested that this “should include clear terms of reference that covers matters like the nature of the third party’s participation..., among others” (Leonen, 2010).

Was this a precondition for the resumption of the talks? What was wrong with the previous facilitator, Othman bin Abdul Razak? These, among many other questions, set off alarm bells that led to the long-drawn debates, and unnecessarily delayed the peace talks.

Barking up the wrong tree

Addressing the 6th Mindanao Media Summit in Davao City almost three months later on 6 November, government panel member Miriam Coronel-Ferrer reiterated their readiness to restart the negotiations.

She, however, repeated Leonen's line that they have "some concerns regarding the process of facilitation, the pending status of which has not enabled the immediate commencement of the talks" (OPAPP, 2010c).

The MILF responded by saying the choice of the facilitator was not the turf of the two panels but rather it is a call of Malaysia, the third party facilitator. Jun Mantawil, head of the MILF Secretariat claimed "the government panel is barking up the wrong tree" suggesting instead that the issue should have been taken up at the level of President Aquino and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib (Luwaran, 2010a).

Incidentally, the two heads of state met at least three times during the period from September to November in New York during the United Nations General Assembly and US-ASEAN Conference, in Japan during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Meeting and in Vietnam during the ASEAN Summit. Yet, there was no official report that the issue of facilitator was ever discussed. This led to the grapevine filling the gap with speculations that the Philippine request was rebuffed by Malaysia.

To stamp its seriousness on the issue, the Central Committee of the MILF formally adopted a resolution on 13 November requesting the Malaysian Prime Minister to retain Othman to "ensure continuity and preservation of the gains of the peace process" (Luwaran, 2010b). Othman, who heads the Research Department of the Prime Minister's Office and accused as biased in favor of the MILF, has been facilitating the talks since the end of 2003.

Three days later, the *Associated Press (AP)* reported that the government peace panel urged Malaysia to name a new facilitator. It quoted Leonen as saying the government panel will have "difficulties" and "trouble" working with the current facilitator, Othman (GMANews.tv, 2010a).

Partisan bridge?

Oblate priest Eliseo Mercado of the Institute for Autonomy and Governance in Cotabato City and a veteran peace talk observer put this issue in perspective in his blog:

"The main obstacle to the resumption of peace talks is, actually, the issue of [the] person of 'facilitator'. This is very queer, indeed!"

In normal times, the facilitator enhances the flow of the talks. The facilitator uses his/her moral sway to move the talks forward. He or she becomes the 'bridge' to allow the two protagonists to speak and work together for the peaceful negotiated settlement that is fair to all.

It seems this is NOT the case with the person of Mr. Othman bin abd Razak, a Special Adviser to the Malaysian Prime Minister's Office. The facilitator Othman actually delays the resumption of the peace talks, because of his perceived partisanship.

The honourable way is for Mr. Othman, in the name of peace, to resign."(Mercado, 2010a)

The heat of the debate in the Philippines has finally caught up with Othman hundreds of miles away in Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian facilitator defended his track record claiming "I manage to build the trust and continue to bridge the two sides" (GMANews.tv, 2010b).

Othman added that if the Philippine government trusted Malaysia "to be the facilitating country, then they should also trust my government's judgment and choice [of facilitator]". He said he will leave it up to the Malaysian Prime Minister to decide whether to retain him or not.

Manila opinion writer Jarius Bondoc upped the ante when he commented on Othman in his column at the *Philippine Star* on 17 December: "All this is happening because of a purported diplomat-facilitator's undiplomatic clinging to a post he has bungled. Othman has messed up ties between his country and the Philippines."

Bondoc, who was appointed to a government controlled corporation just a few days before, (Porcalla, 2010) suggested it is now up to Othman “to look for face-saving and ‘face-giving’ measures, the Asian diplomatic way, to clean up his mess” (Bondoc, 2010).

Way out of gridlock

Several options were seen to resolve the issue and untangle the gridlock.

Former government panel chair Dureza suggested to President Aquino to step in and order the government panel to commence with the talks with the current facilitator, Othman, and put the issue on his replacement on the agenda. He said “The only way out of this impasse now that the GRP panel had made its position public and the Malaysians are not agreeing is for the President to step in and order the GRP panel to go ahead and restart talks and shelve for the moment the panel’s position” (Arguillas, 2010a).

He suggested the replacement of the Malaysian facilitator should not be a precondition for the resumption of the talks but it can be an agenda item.

Malaysian Professor Dr. Kamarulzaman Askandar of Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network, on the other hand, said Othman is still the best person to lead the facilitation. However, he added that replacing Othman was not difficult to do as there are a number of qualified and prominent Malaysians who can fulfill the role of facilitator.

He noted that it would be best to appoint from within the office of the Malaysian Prime Minister, “preferably somebody who has an inside knowledge of the process”(Ibid).

Another way out unofficially discussed by a government panel member with the *AFRIM Peace Monitor* was for Othman to continue to lead the facilitation for a few meetings with his replacement as understudy, and then eventually take an exit probably becoming as a special adviser.

Why can’t direct talks be held?

Was it possible for the two panels to meet, even informally, without the facilitator?

The MILF has ruled out completely any meeting with the government panel anywhere, inside or outside the country, without the third party facilitator. It views direct talks as “masterful trick” to negate the achievements of the peace process.

The MILF fears that resuming the talks without the third party facilitator would “localize or domesticate” the peace process, which has already reached the diplomatic stage.

Muhammad Ameen, head of the MILF Central Committee Secretariat, disclosed that they have consistently but politely refused overtures for direct talks citing “procedure and principle borne out of usage and in deference to the diplomatic stage status” of the negotiations (Luwaran, 2010c).

Rumblings and violence

As the debates went on, rumblings have started to be felt on the ground. Two major protest rallies were held in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao near Cotabato City on 6 November and in Marawi City on 23 November. It drew thousands of people presenting a mix of demands. These include the resumption of peace talks, on one hand, and drop the negotiations, on the other, and for the MILF to go back to its original aim of seeking an independent state. The protesters expressed their frustration at the slow pace of the negotiations, alleged insincerity of the Aquino government, and increasing deployment of government troops in the conflict affected areas.

Another rally was held in Manila on 10 December to mark the International Human Rights Day. It drew support from a wide group of Bangsamoro organizations in the capital reiterating calls for the resumption of the peace talks to find solution to the Mindanao problem.

There has also been a rise of violence in Mindanao during the period, particularly around the holding of the *barangay* elections on 25 October, including bus bombings, burning of school buildings and clashes due to clan and land feuds. A series of kidnappings were likewise reported in Basilan, Sulu, Zamboanga Peninsula and Cotabato City.

This resulted in the deployment of new Philippine Marine troops in Cotabato City starting in November and in Sulu starting in December. This did not sit well with the MILF fearing that this was a deliberate part of plans to prepare for war. Moreover, the MILF complained that their ranks are being decimated with raids and arrests in spite of the ceasefire.

Khaled Musa, deputy chairman of the MILF committee on information lashed at the government on 2 December for bad faith saying “this is a treachery and a mockery of the peace process and the ceasefire”(Luwaran, 2010d).

Prominent among those arrested was MILF Central Committee member Eduard Guerra, a.k.a. Abraham Alonto. He was arrested on 22 September at the Davao International Airport on his way to attend a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland.

The MILF issued a Central Committee Resolution on 11 October protesting the arrest and urging the government to drop charges against Guerra who was accused as an operative of the terror network *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI).

Psywar and evil whisperers

It was also noted that rumors started circulating that the MILF Chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim has suffered a heart attack while in Malaysia, and that, as a result, the front was headed for a split. Both stories were denied by the MILF. Muhammad Ameen, chief of the Secretariat of the MILF Central Committee said Murad “is well, strong and healthy.” The MILF leadership, he assured, “is solid and can stand the test of time and the temptations of evil whisperers” (Luwaran, 2010e).

When Department of National Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin announced in Manila that a so-called Special Operations Group of the MILF was one of the suspects in the bus bombing in Matalam on 21 October that killed 11 passengers, the MILF reacted by filing formal complaints before the joint ceasefire committee.

MILF military spokesman Von Al Haq described Gazmin’s statement as “willful and deliberate intention to undermine the ceasefire accord just only to discredit the MILF before the public and in the international community.” He added that this “provocative statement” was “meant to condition the public that a military action against the MILF has basis and justified” (PDI, 2010).

Another incident denounced by the MILF was the circulation of text messages on 12 December warning the public of a series of bomb attacks in key cities in Central Mindanao. Khaled Musa, deputy chairman of the MILF Committee on Information protested: “This is pure concoction and a scenario making for possible military offensive in Mindanao” (Mallari, 2010).

Massacre aftermath

Europe’s top diplomat in the country Ambassador Alistair Macdonald rues the label that Mindanao is a “land of chaos,” but as the country marked the first year anniversary of the gruesome Maguindanao massacre on 23 November (see *AFRIM Peace Monitor Fourth Quarter 2009*), the heightened violence in Mindanao inevitably came into the forefront again of the national consciousness. Protest activities were held by media, human rights, peace advocates and families of the victims not only in Mindanao but in other parts of the country as well. There were repeated calls for justice to all the 58 victims of this heinous political crime.

Hardly had the protest died down when a prominent Iranon leader of Maguindanao, Vice Mayor Alexander Tomawis of Barira, was assassinated in Davao City on 28 November.

Tomawis was the former mayor of the town and he was described as a favorite godson of Andal Ampatuan, Sr. There were reports that he was being groomed as the clan's candidate for Maguindanao governor in the 2013 elections.

All women contingent

A sharp contrast to the violence in Mindanao was the report of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) that only three skirmishes between government forces and the MILF were recorded since January (Arguillas, 2010b). This was a far cry from the resurgence of encounters in 2008 tallied at 222 after the collapse of the initialed Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD).

The setting up of new Local Monitoring Teams (LMT) coordinating with the IMT commenced in Sarangani Province on 2 October and it progressed with the launching of two Women Contingents in the Civilian Protection Component (CPC) of the IMT. These were in Aleosan, North Cotabato on 4 October and in Kauswagan in Lanao del Norte on 23 November. These two areas were among those badly hit during the resurgence of violence in 2008 which resulted into over 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) in Mindanao, the world's largest recorded for that year.

The all-women volunteer group from the Mindanao People's Caucus (MPC) brings to fruition key provisions of the United Nation Security Council Resolution No. 1325 approved on 31 October a decade ago. UNSCR 1325, entitled "Recognizing Women's Vital Roles in Achieving Peace and Security" ensures equal and full participation of women as active agents in peace and security (UN, n.d.).

The resolution called for the adoption of a gender perspective in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction, and required parties in a conflict to respect women's rights that included the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction (Ibid).

MPC plans to set up similar all-women contingents in Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat and Davao.

Armed Encounters

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Incidents</i>
2003	569 ^[1]
2004	16 ^[2]
2005	13
2006	10
2007	8
2008	222 ^[3]
2009	116
2010	3

[1] At war [2] Entry of IMT [3] MOA-AD

Source: IMT/Mindanews Nov. 8, 2010

Employment for bakwits

At the start of the Aquino administration, there were 15,000 families still staying in various evacuations camps, according to OPAPP. This has been reduced to an estimated 2,500 families by mid-September as Deles announced that the government is setting up an employment program where "one member of identified vulnerable households will be granted 100 days of guaranteed employment in a government project every year" (Arguillas, 2010c).

Part of the recovery plan to help victims of displacements, this employment program will be piloted in 20 communities involving 2,000 families in conflict-affected areas in ARMM.

At a forum on IDP held in Cotabato City on 23 November, participants concluded that the issue on conflict affected communities should not be seen as just a humanitarian concern, but a political issue as well.

The forum cited that the main triggers of internal displacements were mainly political and security reasons such as intractable and resurgence of clashes between government and front forces, eruption of local and family feuds, presence of various armed groups and government military operations.

Guiamel Alim of the host organization, Kadtuntaya Foundation Incorporated said the key challenge now is what concrete actions can be taken to make the IDPs as “actors of peace and not just victims of war” (Luwaran, 2010f).

In Congress, Cagayan de Oro Representative Rufus Rodriguez re-filed the bill “Internal Displacement Act of 2010” which seeks, among others, to punish “war profiteers” who take advantage of relief goods for IDPs (Gallardo, 2010).

It also seeks to ban arbitrary displacement known as “hamletting” and provides mechanisms that will ensure respect for the rights of the IDPs. The same measure already passed the House on 5 March 2009 but, unfortunately, it was not acted upon in the Senate.

“Peaceful and prosperous communities”

Efforts to assist conflict affected communities and families will get focus through OPAPP’s new *Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan* (PAMANA) program. It seeks to build “peaceful and prosperous communities” as a complementary track to the peace negotiations.

Launched on 8 October, Deles said the program aims to empower communities to pursue peace through economic integration and development. It plans to improve the delivery of basic services and institute a more transparent and responsive governance to strengthen community resilience amidst armed conflict.

Deles said OPAPP will work together with other government agencies to address the roots of armed conflict like “Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Interior and Local Government, the Bangsamoro Development Agency and the ARMM Regional Government” (OPAPP, 2010d). Noticeably not mentioned when Deles gave this briefing during the launch was the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

However, at the 3rd anniversary of the National Development Support Command (NADESCOM) a month later on 3 November, Deles paid homage to the role of the AFP.

She said “We are here to affirm our partnership and commitment to address the root of armed conflicts” (OPAPP, 2010e).

NADESCOM is the infrastructure and development arm of the AFP which implements community development projects in the countryside. It is a major pillar of PAMANA, according to OPAPP.

Counter-insurgency?

PAMANA and the involvement of the AFP in the delivery of basic services form part of the national peace and security framework adopted by the new administration. It is anchored on four pillars, namely, good governance, delivery of basic services, sustainable development, and security sector reform.

In another blog post, Fr. Mercado warned that this emerging national security framework “is completely in line with the US Government Counter-Insurgency Guide of 2009” (Mercado, 2010b).

Diplomatic cables and documents included in the latest Wikileaks release reveal Australia’s top intelligence agency telling their US counterparts in 2008 that the Philippines is a “basket case” and that southern Philippines is “the new regional incubator of terrorist jihadis” particularly after the collapse of the peace talks over the MOA-AD (Palumbarit and HS, 2010).

The Department of National Defense (DND) dismissed this leaked report as “outdated” and defended that Philippine security forces have achieved gains in curbing extremist groups (Romero, 2010a). However, what it did not explain was the apparent adoption of a new national security framework in the aftermath of these intelligence assessments.

It was rather no surprise that the MILF would categorize PAMANA as part of a “systematic counter-insurgency program” in what it feared was the government’s dilly-dallying of the peace talks (Luwaran, 2010f).

International support

As the government pursues these twin tracks of negotiations, on one hand, and bringing the needed socio-economic development to the conflict affected areas, on the other, the peace process continues to generate support from the international community.

Officials and delegations from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, European Union, United States, Singapore and Japan were among those who committed during the month of November to continue their support for the peace process and to peace and development projects in Mindanao.

A welcome addition to the International Contact Group (ICG) was Saudi Arabia, an influential member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). It notified Malaysia of its participation on 11 November. This brings to four the member states of the ICG, namely, United Kingdom, Turkey and Japan.

The ICG was created in September 2009 to sustain the interest of the parties and exert proper leverage in the negotiations. It also seeks to ensure the successful implementation and compliance of signed agreements.

Four non-state groups are also part of the ICG, namely, The Asia Foundation, based in Washington, DC, US; Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue based in Geneva, Switzerland; Muhammadiyah based in Jakarta, Indonesia; and Conciliation Resources based in London, UK.

More voices

Another London-based peace-building NGO International Alert (IA) sees the lull in the talks as a temporary “hump” which can be overcome by both parties. Francisco Lara, Jr., its Philippine Country Director told a meeting in December 2-3 of the low-key Mindanao Multi-stakeholders Group (MMG) composed of representatives from civil society, business and local government units (LGUs), the need to intensify the engagement of local officials and local businesses to promote inclusive peace in Mindanao.

IA has recently pioneered a political mapping project on the engagements of LGUs and legislators from Mindanao in an effort to draw in the active involvement of local officials in the peace process. It is likewise pursuing efforts to promote conflict-sensitive business practices among key business enterprises in Mindanao, initially in the mining and energy industries.

This effort found common traction as the 19th Mindanao Business Conference held in Cagayan de Oro on 17-18 September identified energy as a key agenda along with calls for the resumption of talks between the two panels.

The new chairperson of the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) Luwalhati Antonino, a former Member of Congress representing General Santos City agreed. She said this business agenda “only manifests the Mindanao business community’s collective and burning desire to fulfill Mindanao’s development potentials and to effect progressive socio-economic transformation amidst the challenges” (Sunstar Cagayan de Oro, 2010a).

And as MinDA completes a new Mindanao 2020 Peace and Development Framework, the new head of the Confederation of Mindanao Governors, City and Municipal Mayors Davao del Norte Governor Rodolfo del Rosario believed that “a holistic and multi-dimensional peace and development roadmap is vital to promote inclusive broad-based growth in Mindanao” (Sunstar Davao, 2010).

The new head of the Mindanao Legislators Association (MLA) Congressman Loreto Leo Ocampos of the 2nd District of Misamis Occidental, added “we must be united as one voice so that we can strongly present our positions to the President for more funding and attention” (Ibid).

Attention from Malacanang appeared to be quick as both Confed and MLA officials were ushered in to the Palace for their joint induction rites held on 1 December. On this occasion, the Mindanao 2020 plan was endorsed to President Aquino.

Meanwhile, the head of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) vowed to support the resumption of the peace talks.

Delivering the State-of-the-Region address on 6 December, acting regional governor Ansaruddin Adiong said “believing in peace as a catalyst for growth, we continuously render our full support to the peace efforts of the national government and the Moro Fronts. After all, the ARMM with its more than four million constituents is still the biggest stakeholder to any dividend of peace (ARMM Official Website, 2010). He said the ARMM was on the final stage of drafting its own regional peace agenda in support of the national government’s peace and development plans (see *AFRIM Peace Monitor 2nd Quarter 2010*).

Civil society

Efforts from many civil society groups have been relentless since the promise of the new administration for renewed peace talks. More voices resonated from this vital sector particularly around the celebration of the annual week of peace with the theme “Responsive and responsible governance: Key to peace, development and sustainability.”

Aware that the peace process is such a long and complex one, sustainability indeed is a key, the involvement of youth a must, and use of current technology, a necessity. On 2 December, around 2,000 students and out-of-school youths participated in a mass video-conference on peace. Held at the De La Salle University in Manila and Western Mindanao State University in Zamboanga City, the novel event brought technology at the forefront of the peace process to facilitate dialogue between groups separated by distance, cultures and beliefs.

The discourse in understanding the complex issues in Mindanao were likewise enriched with more papers written and books launched during the period. The new studies were presented at the 31st National Conference on Local and National History on 21-23 October in General Santos City;(Manila Times, 2010) the books were presented during the week of peace celebration that feature “the unique dynamics, strategies and evolution of peace and development communities” in conflict affected areas (Tejano, 2010).

One of the groups building communities of “just peace” is the Mindanao Peoples’ Peace Movement (MPPM). It held its 6th Peace Summit in Upi, Maguindanao on 13-16 December bannering the tri-people character of Mindanao as it reiterated calls for the settlement of the Mindanao conflict. MPPM is the first broad-based organization that called, as early as 2002, for an UN-managed referendum to settle the Mindanao question (MPPM, 2010).

The First International Solidarity Conference on Mindanao held in Davao City on 17 March 2009 has considered the same option. One of its conference resolutions reads: “In the event that the third party facilitation efforts between the government and the MILF will not prosper, this conference will elevate the resolution of the Bangsamoro problem to the United Nations for their appropriate diplomatic action” (MPC, 2010).

Misconceptions, misgivings

From the Senate, the chair of the Committee on Peace, Unification and Reconciliation Senator Teofisto Guingona III also joined calls for the two parties to immediately resume the peace talks even on an informal basis. He said the people are “becoming impatient” (Sunstar Cagayan de Oro, 2010b).

Earlier, he suggested the creation of a joint communication group for the two sides to help explain to the people the intricacies of the peace process. He said “the last thing we want is an excellent peace agreement but will be rejected by the people because of misconceptions” in reference to the failed MOA-AD in 2008 (Mindanews, 2010).

The role of Congress is seen to take even more importance as Presidential Adviser Deles had a reported spat with a Muslim legislator during the deliberation of the annual budget in the Lower House. Members of the chamber rallied around the embattled Rep. Aliah Dimaporo of Lanao del Norte and unanimously passed a Resolution calling for Deles’ ouster. Although President Aquino defended, and retained, Deles, animosity towards her remains high among members of congress and even their staff.

This raised fears that the cold relationship might haunt the peace process as Congress is taken on board during the crucial stages of the peace talks.

Deles' problem with members of congress was not, however, limited to her role as peace adviser and the alleged insult on the young Dimaporo. *AFRIM Peace Monitor* learned that some members of congress, particularly from Muslim provinces, have misgivings over her support for Hamid Barra of the Ulama League of the Philippines to sit as the new head of the National Commission on Filipino Muslims (NCMF).

This post is currently being hotly contested between the incumbent, Bai Omera Dianalan-Lucman, an appointee of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and President Aquino's planned replacement. The row has divided the *ummah* or Muslim community and the legal battle is now in the Supreme Court.

Deles' troubles with members of congress were also compounded when President Aquino named her November 8 as cabinet oversight officer for the National Commission Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). This entangled her in another turf war with some congressmen who have been pushing for certain nominees as NCIP regional directors in their districts. Their nominees apparently were not endorsed by Deles.

During a birthday party thrown for her by her staff on 11 November, Deles admitted that she has learned her lessons in dealing with congress. She remarked that the experience has taught her to be conscious of connecting politics, governance and development in bringing the peace agenda forward. "I feel even more ready to address the challenges ahead," she confided (OPAPP, 2010f).

Stay the course

As doubts build up every passing week over the delay in the resumption of the talks, Deles tried to address the big challenge ahead as she appealed on peace advocates to "stay the course."

"I understand your skepticism, but you need to believe that the government is sincere in pursuing peace" she declared in Zamboanga City on 29 November at the forum on the Mindanao People's Peace Agenda (OPAPP, 2010g).

Two recent developments augur well for the resumption of the talks. First, is the mutual concurrence by the two parties for the extension of the tour of the IMT, and the second, is the increasing pace achieved on the resumption of talks between the government and the National Democratic Front (NDF).

In a *note verbale* sent to Malaysia on 1 December, the government sought the extension of the tour of the IMT members, which would have expired by 8 December 2010. The MILF reciprocated by saying "we will not propose but we will not also oppose" the request believing that the reckoning date of the IMT's mandate is one year from arrival on 28 February 2010 to 28 February 2011 (Arguillas, 2010d).

Within the week, Brunei and Japan, both responded positively. Government panel member Miriam Coronel-Ferrer told the *Waging Peace in the Philippines Conference* on 7 December that they see no problem for the other members of the IMT to stay until February 28 next year. This includes the lead country Malaysia, and Libya. In some components of the IMT, the EU and local and International NGOs are also involved.

Ferrer also disclosed that their panel was taking inspiration from the breakthrough in the GRP-NDF talks. An open, friendly and freewheeling chair-to-chair meeting was held in Hong Kong on 3 December between Undersecretary Alexander Padilla and Luis Jalandoni. Without any pre-condition, both parties agreed on a 19-day ceasefire from December 16, 2010 to January 3, 2011, the longest in five years. The two panels also set a timetable for an informal meeting again in mid-January 2011 and formal talks to commence in Oslo in February 2011 under the auspices of the Royal Norwegian government, the third party facilitator.

IMT Tour of Duty

<i>Batch</i>	<i>Period</i>
<i>IMT 1</i>	<i>Oct. 10, 2004 – Sept. 10, 05</i>
<i>IMT 2</i>	<i>Sept. 11, 2005 – Sept. 8, 06</i>
<i>IMT 3</i>	<i>Sept. 9, 2006 – Sept. 3, 07</i>
<i>IMT 4</i>	<i>Sept. 4, 2007 – Nov. 30, 08¹</i>
<i>IMT 5</i>	<i>Dec. 8, 2010 – Feb. 28, 11²</i>

¹ With agreed extension

² Current status

Source: Luwaran, December 5, 2010

Exploratory chair-to-chair meeting

The surprising pace on the NDF track has now put pressure on the MILF track to move forward as soon as possible. Government panel chair Leonen flew to Kuala Lumpur on 2 December to personally hand carry three letters to the Malaysian government. He announced that he has sent the letter of President Aquino to Prime Minister Najib, his letter of credentials as the new government panel chair, and a letter of invitation to MILF panel chair Iqbal for "exploratory talks" between the two chairs of the panels to take place before December 14. The letters were received by Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Richard Riot.

The last letter has not reached Iqbal a full week later, nevertheless the government panel's move was welcome news to peace advocates and many watchers who have grown anxious over the incessant delays seen during the past five months (Luwaran, 2010h).

Akbayan Partylist Representative Walden Bello commenting on the resumption of peace talks between the GRP and the NDF believed that central to the government's peace effort is Mindanao. "The major theater is Mindanao and the core challenge to peace there is arriving at a viable formula for self-determination for the Moro people" he wrote in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on 15 December.

He added that "a breakthrough in Mindanao will not come about except with an act of political courage." For Bello, political courage meant "President Aquino's breaking with the Christian chauvinist's agenda that has been the central obstacle to a just settlement" (Bello, 2010).

Bello added that now that the government has reached out to the NDF and CPP, it must also get the peace process rolling in Mindanao.

Christmas cheers

If such "exploratory talks" indeed finally rolls to action, it would be the first clear sign that would finally illuminate the darkening road ahead in the peace process in Mindanao.

It would likewise be a bundle of Christmas cheers that would make many, not just peace advocates, happy. Take the case, for instance, of Marines from Luzon long assigned on combat duty in Mindanao:

"We plan to eat together on Christmas. I will make up for the times that I was not with them" said Marine Corporal Amando Marquez, who has not celebrated Christmas with his family in Tanza, Cavite for a couple of years. "We have not seen each other for a long time and we hope we can gather together (this holiday season)" according Marine S/Sgt. Albert Ekid, who got enlisted in 1995 (Romero, 2010b). He wants to visit his wife and three children in Zamboanga City as well as his father and siblings in his hometown in Mt. Province.

As Filipinos, particularly Mindanaoans, celebrate the holidays, many would be wishing for peace not just for this Christmas or the coming New Year, but hoping for peace down the long road and for a long, long time.

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