



Peace Monitor

ALTERNATE FORUM FOR RESEARCH IN MINDANAO, INC.

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Mindanao peace process

...there lays hope



Through the years, the long standing armed conflict in Mindanao is oftentimes viewed as a conflict between two armed groups: a clash between the government armed forces and revolutionary groups. However, with the escalation of conflict recording the world's highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2008, another group not basically engaged in the conflict but directly affected by it has been recognized. Indeed, three main players are involved in the Mindanao conflict, the two conflicting parties and the civilians residing in conflict areas.

Thus, protecting the lives of this considerable number of defenseless civilians who became victims of the armed conflict has eventually evolved as the moving force for a louder call for the immediate resumption of peace talks. This call includes the reactivation of ceasefire mechanisms to enable IDPs to return to their homes and rebuild their normal lives.

Responding to the call, President Gloria M. Arroyo ordered a Suspension of Military Operations (SOMO) on 23 July 2009, which was immediately reciprocated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) Suspension of Military Actions (SOMA) two days thereafter (Arguillas, 2009a). On the other hand, hopes for the resumption of peace talks were high when members of both the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF peace panels finally met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 28-29 July 2009 and released a joint statement expressing their desire and commitment to resume peace talks (GMANews.TV, 2009).

Ongoing armed skirmishes despite SOMO, SOMA

Aside from promoting peace and stability, the SOMO is part of the government's efforts in bringing back the trust and confidence between the two parties in order to provide a stable environment for the resumption of peace talks (Arguillas, 2009a). It mandated the suspension of military operations in conflict-affected areas and directed government forces to revert back to "active defense mode" except for the excluded MILF troops of the so called rogue commanders.

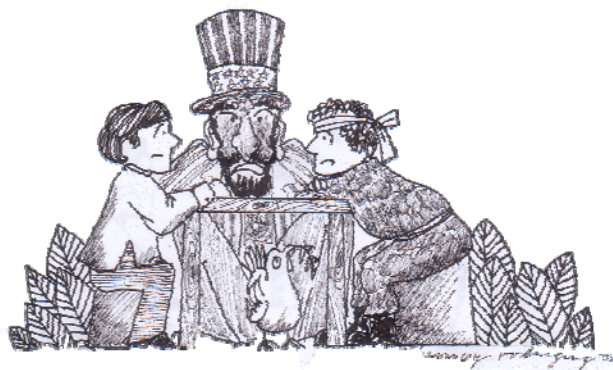
However, clashes or "chance encounters" between the AFP and MILF and the former's aerial bombardments still occur. Nine civilians (eight of them were children) were seriously wounded due to AFP's mortar shelling near an evacuation area in the villages of Macasendeg in Pikit, North Cotabato and Dasawao and Reina Regente in Datu Piang, Maguindanao on 6 August (Luwaran, 2009a). Eid Kabalu, chairperson of the civilian-military relations of the MILF stated that government troops launched a military operation in Talitay, Maguindanao just few days after it declared its own SOMO (Luwaran, 2009b). Aside from alleged uncoordinated operations of the AFP troops in the MILF communities, these reported cases of ongoing skirmishes have also been attributed to the ongoing military operations against MILF troops excluded from the SOMO. With this situation on the ground, SOMO and SOMA have been barely enough to replace the previous ceasefire mechanisms which have been successful in lowering cases of armed encounters in the past years. As a result, around 200, 900 people were still unable to go back home because of fear that fighting would erupt again. Others do not have the choice but to stay in evacuation areas because their houses and farms were totally damaged in the armed encounters (Tesiorna et.al., 2009). Thus, a more stable ceasefire mechanism, such as the revival of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) is needed to provide enabling environment both for the future resumption of peace talks and the safe return of the IDPs.

Motives behind SOMO

The government's SOMO was declared few days before GMA was about to deliver the 2009 State of the Nations Address (SONA) on 27 July. She also announced the formal signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) during her 2008 SONA. The Supreme Court's decision on the MOA-AD's unconstitutionality halted the signing which caused the escalation of conflict in various parts of Mindanao.

With this pretext, arguments on the motives of SOMO declaration are resounding. SOMO might only serve the government's need for a relatively peaceful environment due to incoming 2010 elections. Other groups argue that it is implemented due to Arroyo administration's efforts to hammer out its ruined image in the international community because of grave human rights violations and inhumane conditions of the IDPs. Further, SOMO could also be another lip service of the government and not sincerely targeted to protect the IDPs (Luwaran, 2009d).

Moreover, it is observed that the ceasefire might be needed by the government to avail financial assistance from foreign humanitarian organizations and to justify the release of billions of infrastructure funds for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for instance, has committed huge amount of financing to assist Mindanao's economic growth



through the creation of employment opportunities, poverty reduction, as well as peace and stability programs (Mallo, 2009a).

On October and December 2008, the European Commission's (EC) Humanitarian Aid Department extended another assistance amounting to PhP 200 million in addition to the 6.5 million euros (approximately PhP 444 million) which cover food and nutrition, water and sanitation and primary health care for the evacuees (Sunstar, 2009a).

And to complement the peace process, the national government released PhP1 billion infrastructure subsidies to mayors and governors of the ARMM for their projects on roads, bridges, flood control and water systems. According to ARMM public works regional secretary Hadji Rasul Abpi, the projects aim to improve the economy of the areas of revolutionary forces for them to feel government's sincerity on its peace efforts in Mindanao (Sunstar, 2009b).

Guaranteed agreements through ICG

The MILF peace panel shall return to the negotiating table only when two of the four agreed points – the establishment of the International Contact Group (ICG) and a mission for the protection of non-combatants – in the recent peace panels' meeting are in place (Luwaran, 2009c).

The ICG's framework agreement was signed on 15 September. This is reportedly MILF's mechanism of ensuring that any agreements discussed during the peace talks are implemented and not just remain on papers. The ICG, will consist of "interested countries accompanying the peace process preferably drawn from the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the European Union (EU) as well as accredited international non-government organizations to be invited by the Parties in consultation with the Third Party Facilitator" (Arguillas, 2009b). This mechanism might help in guaranteeing

implementation of future agreements, yet it would hardly replace or restore shattered trust between the GRP and MILF peace panels.

The agreement on the protection of non-combatants, on the other hand, is a mechanism that will provide protection for civilians, including their properties, during armed conflicts. It will also give new mandate for the IMT to come back to Mindanao so as to perform its crucial task in monitoring ceasefire agreements and in creating enabling environment for the resumption of peace talks. The details of the agreements is being finalized and will be signed on October 2009. Such agreement is the third among the four points discussed during the GRP-MILF's first meeting held in July 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, barely 11 months after the MOA-AD debacle. Other agreed points were the mechanisms to sustain the SOMO and the Suspension of Military Action (SOMA), the establishment of the ICG, and acknowledgment of the MOA-AD (Arguillas, 2009c).

Inconsistent peace policies

Shifts in peace policies do not only happen from one administration to another but also within one administration. On March 2001, GMA signed the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace and vowed for an "all out peace" reversing her predecessor's "all out war" policy. But a year after, she shifted gears in line with the United States' global war on terrorism after the infamous 911 attack saying she "will not allow the peace process to stand in the way of the overriding fight against terrorism". Consequently, the AFP staged a full-scale attack on the MILF camp in Buliok Complex, Pikit, North Cotabato in 2003 (Diaz, 2009).

From 2004 to 2007, informal and formal talks between the GRP and MILF took place along with the offensive and defensive armed encounters between the AFP and the MILF. Rapid shifts on the administration's peace policy can be observed in 2008.

The government shifted from Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration or DDR policy to a forward looking strategy called 3Rs which means Renegotiate, Reaffirm and Review” then to Task Force HELP-CM which stands for Health, Education, Livelihood, Progress-Central Mindanao. After dismantling its peace panels in September 2008, the government mandated that all negotiations with armed groups shall be in the context of the DDR which presupposes disarmament and demobilization of armed groups and their reintegration into the mainstream society. This seemed unacceptable to the MILF since in the context of a peace process, DDR should be imposed only after a peace compact is signed. On the other hand, RRR was an offer for the MILF to renegotiate, reaffirm and review the MOA-AD (Diaz, 2009). With the RRR from the government still not convincing, the government issued Administrative Order 267 creating Task Force HELP-CM. This shall be the “mechanism for convergence, i.e., “ enhance cooperation, coordination, policy consistency, adoption of a common framework, information sharing and problem-solving activities of the different agencies in the MILF-related conflict affected areas in Central Mindanao”.

In general, there has been no “peace policy consensus, coherence and consistency” on the part of the government. With the “protracted people’s war, the government came up with protracted peace processes (Santos, 2009). Inconsistencies of government’s efforts has contributed to the prolonged peace negotiations and exacerbated the MILF’s lack of trust on the present administration.

In spite of the Arroyo administration’s varying approaches in crafting Mindanao’s road map to peace, reality depicts that there have been factors beyond the Philippine government’s control. First, the Arroyo administration has no luxury of time to fast track and conclude the peace process through signing a comprehensive peace compact with less than eight months left before the end of President’s term. It took 10 years for the GRP and MILF peace panels to build trust and confidence

with each other and was broken with the failure of the peace process following the aborted MOA-AD signing. With the new strategy, Task Force HELP-CM, which apparently calls for new talking agenda, the MILF stands firm on its agenda on starting from where the talks broke up- from the MOA - AD to the Comprehensive Peace Compact. On the other hand, the new GRP peace panel may possibly propose revisions to the MOA-AD as they would be “conditioned by the Supreme Court’s MOA-AD decision”. If this happens, there would be another endless impasse in the offing (Diaz, 2009).

Move to suspend the resumption of peace talks

The alleged involvement of the MILF in the Philippine Marines’ operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Tipo-tipo, Basilan on 12 August put into question MILF leadership, its chain of command and its capacity to enforce any peace agreement” (PDI, 2009). According to reports, the MILF allegedly ambushed the Marines who were running after the ASG, insinuating that the former was in connivance with the ASG.

Relatedly, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Avelino Razon Jr., stressed that the “involvement of some MILF members in the gun battle was an isolated case, and would not in any way affect the upcoming peace talks”.

On the other hand, Senator Rodolfo Biazon was determined to pursue Senate Resolution 1281 which seeks to suspend the resumption of peace talks unless the MILF addresses the issue on its involvement in the Marines’ operations against the ASG (Uy, 2009). The said resolution, if approved, might hinder the future resumption of peace talks and this might justify the US’s proclamation on 20 August that it will retain its 600 elite troops for counter-insurgency operations in Mindanao despite pressure to pull them out due to their involvement in several cases of human rights violations (Shanker, 2009).

Formulas to solve Mindanao problem

In the last decades, the quite common assertion on the solution to the Mindanao problem has been economic development through pouring in of investments from foreign multinational companies. Thus, extractive industries such as mining, logging, monocrop plantations sprouted in resource-rich provinces of the island.

But in reality, this strategy only made Mindanao as merely satellite economies to Metro Manila and Cebu. Much of the earnings from the said industries usually go to the national government's treasury giving back only a pinch of it in the form of Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA).

Decades of experiences show that a lasting peace is the "primary impediment to development in Mindanao" (Habito, 2009). A recent assessment on the implementation of Mindanao 2000 by the Mindanao Economic Development Council (MEDCO) reveals that "substantial progress had been made in key areas" in the previous years but "the goals and targets it set forth, (especially pertaining to the island's peace and development) were largely unattained" as manifested by the collapse of the GRP-MILF peace talks during the Estrada Administration.

Politicians contending to lead the country in the year 2010 had also expressed their proposed solution to the Mindanao problem which seemed to be wanting. For Senator Loren Legarda, the solution to the Mindanao conflict is to pour in funds for skills training and livelihood projects in poorest of the poor areas especially those inhabited by armed groups. Senators Mar Roxas and Ramon Revilla Jr., on the other hand, suggest an all-out-war against the rebels, while Senator Francis Escudero stressed on the importance of the peace talks especially the sincerity of the panels negotiating for peace.

With more peace researches coming from a wider and more varied peace frameworks, analysis reveals that the Mindanao problem is not only economic in nature. It is essentially a conflict on the access and control of Mindanao resources- the inequitable distribution of the island's resources and government policies which promoted further exclusion of marginalized sectors or groups in Mindanao (AFRIM, 2009). So long as this resourced-based conflict is not addressed, armed conflicts may continue to exist. As stated by Cabinet Secretary Silvestre H. Bello III, "peace is achieved by addressing the root causes of armed conflict" (PIA, 2009). Programs that are aimed only at poverty alleviation and economic development of the people may bring temporary peace but in the long run, will not be sustainable.

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Peace Monitor

A monthly analyses on the updates of the peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF. It also contains issues involving efforts of the government and the civil society towards peace and development in Mindanao.

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