



Peace Monitor

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More of the same, but for the big shindig

In May, one month before the second round of negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), three developments stood out as noteworthy: 1) the US' insistence in declaring the Moro rebels' alleged ties with terrorist groups, 2) the visit of a high-level Australian diplomat to officials of the Bangsamoro Development Authority, and 3) the large assembly mobilized by the MILF for a consultation.

US charge d'affaires Joseph Mussomeli, who earlier sparked a public outcry for saying that Mindanao was comparable to Afghanistan, was quoted anew to have defended his controversial statement. Mussomeli said what he said was "worth it," as it had encouraged the public to be more vigilant about terrorism and prodded government to pay more attention to Mindanao.

Right after his statement, US deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick echoed his colleague's observations by saying that the Mindanao situation continues to be "dangerous," caused in large part to the presence of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Zoellick added that the JI has been found to have maintained links with "groups with a radical agenda," apparently alluding to rebel movements such as the MILF.

In a similar move, the USAid pulled out a \$1 million road project in Cotabato City, saying that the area was coddling "terrorist financiers." The fund was part of a \$30 million infrastructure package being implemented by the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program.

President Arroyo was unruffled. She said that instead of jumping the gun, "the more prudent thing is to get to the bottom of it." Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema riled at the withdrawal, saying that it smacked of "American insensitivity and high handedness." The MILF, too, was quick to defend Sema, concurrent

secretary-general of the Moro National Liberation Front. MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu said that in the absence of "solid evidence," the city deserved an apology from USAid mission director Michael Yates, who issued the statement about the "terrorist financiers."

In the meantime, the US continued to put one foot on Mindanao soil, struggling to put a human face in its presence. The GEM Program claims to have benefited 3,800 residents for a water system it has installed in Patikul town, erstwhile the lair of extremists. It is only one of 22 other "high impact" small infrastructure projects delivered by the program to the area.

But Washington's presence in the island has not been without controversy. For even as the joint Philippine-US military exercises dubbed Balance Piston 05-03 was winding up in Basilan, 25 American military personnel were reported to have been flown in to Sulu. While the mission was clothed with benign objectives, militant organizations were not impressed. "We refuse to believe that the US military is surveying Sulu for humanitarian reasons. The US government does not give away anything for free. . . (it) has all the motives to refuel the war between the Moro rebel groups and government forces in order to justify its maneuvering and actual implementation of military affairs in Mindanao," declared the Suara Bangsamoro Party List organization.

Such prospects may not be far-fetched, if one believes the news of a US spy plane crashing in Palimbang town, Sultan Kudarat. Known in security parlance as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the drone plane is "used by the US . . . against the so-called local allies of the al-Qaeda group, the Abu Sayaf, and Jemaah Islamiyah," according to unverified reports.

In the middle of the month, the Third Secretary for Political, Economic, and Public Affairs of the Australian embassy paid a visit to top officials of the Bangsamoro

Development Authority (BDA) in Cotabato City. The diplomat's visit was considered an important development in view of the BDA's mandate to receive and utilize multilateral support in furtherance of the peace and development goals of Muslim Mindanao. Australia had earlier committed more than \$1 million to jumpstart a Mindanao Trust Fund, created by government to support social development initiatives in the island.

The Australian diplomat's visit was only one among a few others, who came in an apparent display of support to the MILF. Towards the end of the month, the MILF mustered supporters by the hundreds of thousands (100,000 according to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 500,000 according to *Mindanews*) in an unprecedented 3-day assembly in a town in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. Among those who graced the event were representatives from the Organization of Islamic Countries, the World Bank, and the Philippine government.

The consultation sent out two key signals to the national and international communities. One, that the MILF's supporters remain formidable, and two, that the desire for peace reigns supreme across their ranks. For among the most applauded speeches during the assembly was that of presidential adviser on the peace process Teresita Quintos-Deles, who said that "we will succeed; we cannot go back to the path of war."

Deles wasn't the only one who waxed conciliatory. MILF chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim appealed for all concerned to "work together to attain peace." Others who expressed confidence in the peace process were Ebrahim's vice chair for political affairs Ghazali Jaafar and vice chair for military affairs Abdulaziz Mimbantas, MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal, government panel chair Silvestre Afable, Jr., and ambassador Salem Adem of the Socialist Peoples Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Speaking through an emissary, detained MNLF chair Nur Misuari expressed his "felicitation and encouragement for the leadership of the MILF."

The delegates had reason to be upbeat. Only a month earlier, the government and MILF panels emerged optimistic from talks in Kuala Lumpur, during which "the two sides made progress on resolving the Muslims' territorial rights claims—the first tangible result in years of negotiations," according to a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* dispatch. And although critical elements of ancestral domain, the negotiation's most contentious issue, had yet to be tabled at the next round of talks in

June in Malaysia, Brig. Gen. Jose Angel Honrado, Armed forces of the Philippines spokesman, observed that at the rate the two parties were going, they were "making headway." For his part, Chief government negotiator Silvestre Afable issued a fearless forecast that a final accord will be signed before the year ends.

Throughout the welter of terror rhetoric, mammoth rebel gatherings, foreign spies, and local peace talks, armed encounters—or at least the reporting of them—were kept to a minimum. Such a respite could only be welcomed by a community rent by the staccato of gunfire. And out of this painfully embraced lull came an almost inaudible voice of peace:

"War and its militarist solutions are provided more than enough space in various literature and mediums. Adults have always prescribed their own solutions to the conflict in Mindanao while society's elites have comfortably defended their agenda by positioning themselves in various civil society groups as representatives of the Mindanawon. But the time is also ripe for shifting positions and strategies. Go back to the basics. Let the authentic voice of the people especially the women and children take place in building the culture of peace," wrote Radzini Oledan in her *Sunstar* column.

Sources:

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