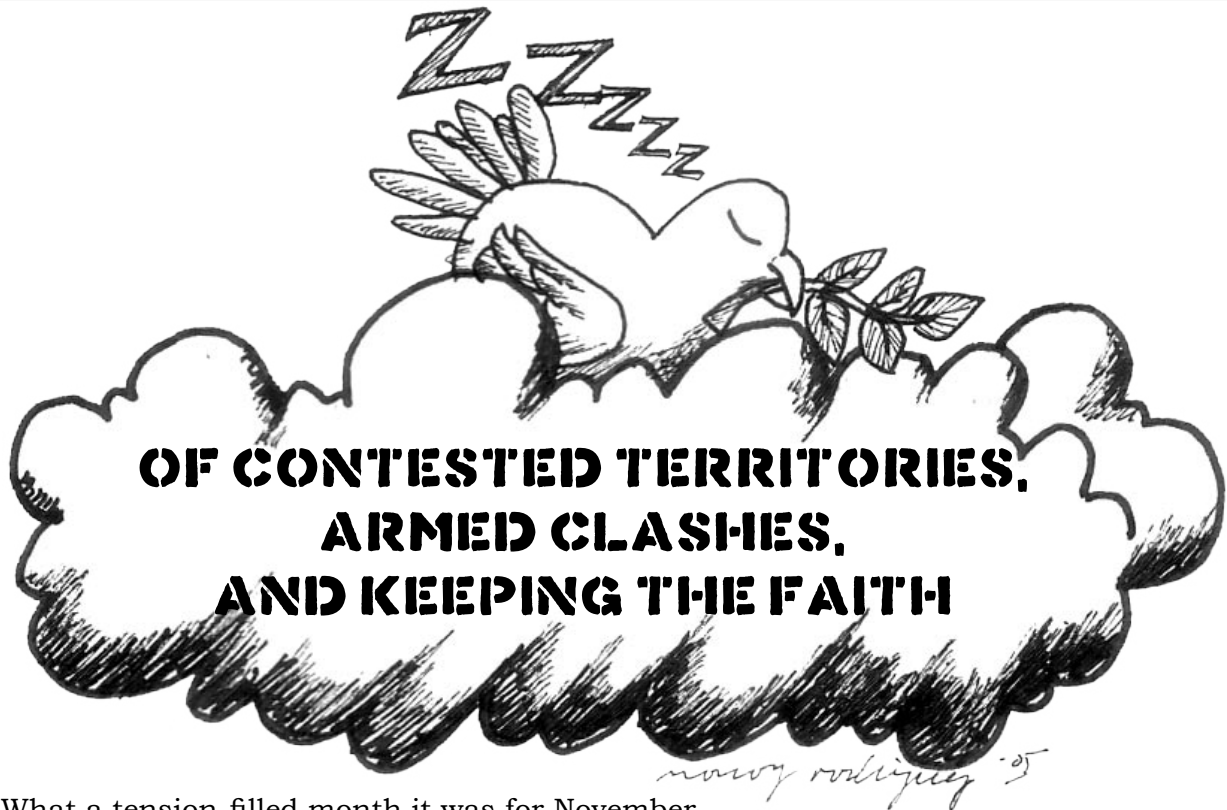




Peace Monitor

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What a tension-filled month it was for November.

Peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had suffered a major setback in September, when the latter walked out of a government offer of including over 600 villages to a so-called Bangsamoro Juridical Entity. The talks, after nine years of hardnosed negotiations, were reaching a much-awaited settlement when they collapsed over territorial issues; the MILF wanted at least 3,000 villages. Government spent much of October pressing its ear on the ground for recommendations on how to move forward, and had thrice promised to get back to the rebels with a new proposal.

“The ball is with the government,” declared MILF panel member Datu Michael Mastura. Not necessarily so, countered Cotabato Archbishop Orlando Quevedo. The prelate, former president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, was quoted to have observed that “the ball is in the hands of both panels. Each one has to go back and discuss with its own group how creative they can be, how flexible they can be...”

A revised plan was indeed submitted to the MILF on 9 November, six days shy of Manila's self-imposed deadline. But reports of skirmishes and troop movements pervaded most of the first half of the month. Just two days before November, the small town of Kukoy, Sharif Aguak, in Maguindanao was the scene of a gun battle when rebel positions were allegedly attacked by members of the paramilitary Civilian Volunteers Organization (CVO). Members of the Joint GRP-MILF Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) and the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team rushed to the scene and managed to diffuse the tension, but the incident was repeated within hours of the first assault, when the CVOs launched six rounds of mortar fire to knock down a ceasefire monitoring post. Still another brief encounter happened in the same area on 2 November.

Also in Zamboanga Sibugay, a 30-minute firefight occurred when Army troops spotted, and opened fire on, an MILF foot patrol at Sitio Dammang, Upper Tungawan.

An MILF analyst was quoted in the revolutionary group's website, www.luwaran.com, that there were two possible reasons why pockets of fighting continued in the countryside, despite the volatile stage of the peace negotiations. This was "either part of the plan of the government, or some of the soldiers are (being) paid by a powerful politician in Maguindanao," he said.

But there was nothing to worry, intoned Jesus Dureza, Presidential Adviser on the

Peace Process, immediately following the Maguindanao attacks. "Isolated incidents," he said at a press interview when asked about the repercussions of the armed confrontations to the peace process. After meeting with Brig. Gen. Edgardo Gurrea, chair of government's CCCH, and his MILF counterpart Von Al Haq, the peace adviser said that the "ceasefire is holding" and that "everything is under control."

Dureza had apparently spoken too soon, because two days after the 2 November battle, guns were again drawn between the two camps, still in the same town in Sharif Aguak. This time, media turned to MILF spokesperson Eid Kabalu, who said that the incident was manageable. "This is nothing," he said.

That some elements of the military apparently did not care much about the peace talks was getting obvious. But neither did it help that the rebels themselves were issuing belligerent statements. When the justice department filed criminal charges against rebel leaders in October following the bombing in Makilala, Cotabato and Tacurong City, rebel leaders declared the charges as "a hostile provocation whose dire consequences will widen the existing cleavage between the MILF and the Philippine Government." To be sure, Cotabato governor Emmanuel Piñol had started the word war when, right after the bombings, he'd gone on the air and blamed the insurgents without batting an eyelash. But the verbal tit-for-tat, which dragged on until November, exacerbated rather than strengthened the fragile peace process.

When government finally came up with its second proposal on 9 November, it was not attended by fanfare, considering the severity of the erstwhile impasse. The MILF curtly described the document as one that was “good for the eye to see,” and was “worth looking at seriously.” MILF chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal added that the stipulation regarding self-determination was the document’s “main sweetener.”

Government, of course, was confident it hammered out an acceptable manuscript. Jesus Dureza said the proposal was “a way forward” and had a “positive chance” of breaking the impasse. By 15 November, five days after receiving the proposal, the MILF had yet to release an official reaction.

Civil society was unperturbed. The Mindanao People’s Caucus (MPC), a group of grassroots-based peace organizations, was convinced there continues to be broad public support for peace. Having made the rounds with diplomats, senior government officials, and church leaders in Manila, MPC stalwarts said they came home assured that the cause of sustainable peace in Mindanao enjoys the full support of key sectors in the nation’s capital.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), one of the pioneering missionary groups in Mindanao, called on both sides of the conflict to return to negotiations. It also enjoined embattled communities to continually seek ways “to build genuine relationships of mutual dialogue and shared aims.” Under the auspices of the Davao Archdiocese, thousands of young people from all over

the country converged in Davao City. The five-day activity sought to “inspire the youth to go beyond the barriers of cultures, prejudices, races, and religions.”

Not to be outdone, proud owners of powerful Harley Davidsons and Hondas in the East Asean Growth Area (EAGA) geared up early in November to ride all the way from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei to Zamboanga City, to join their Mindanao counterparts in a historic Ride for Peace campaign.

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