



# Peace Monitor

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What are the politics behind a bombing?

Such a question was the raging concern among many quarters in Mindanao civil society last month, as bombs ripped through Tacurong, Sultan Kudat, and Makilala, North Cotabato within a span of only eight hours last October 10.

Four persons were hurt in a noontime blast at the Tacurong public market that day, while the roadside explosion in Makilala around 8:00 p.m. left six people killed and 32 wounded.

It was just a little over a month following the impasse in the peace talks between government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Negotiations on ancestral domain had ground to a standstill when the MILF demanded for over a thousand villages for inclusion in some future Bangsamoro territory, against the government's 613. The talks collapsed, fanning the public's fears of renewed conflict.

It did not help any that the MILF began rattling its saber the minute the impasse occurred, fueling apprehensions that the rebels were getting perilously impatient—or bullheaded, depending on which side of the political fence one was sitting.

Thankfully, such pessimism was not contagious. Lt. Gen. Dato' Hj Shahron bin Hj Ibrahim, chief of staff of the Royal Malaysian Armed Forces and a member of the International Monitoring Team did not believe there was any grave impasse. "It might have slowed down a bit which is but natural in the negotiation process. I am confident that all parties remain committed and I am sure that they can move on with better prospects," he said. The deadlock, if it could be called one, was also a "process problem" more than anything else, said a senior government official; it was difficult, but not insurmountable.

After awhile, even the MILF conceded to the probability, if not inevitability, of achieving consensus with the government, which was the ultimate goal of all earnest negotiations. This benign attitude pervaded the better part of two weeks.

Until Tacurong and Makilala were bombed.

And then the speculations—from a spectrum of perspectives—arose again.

For even as the fighting did not resume—at least, not in the scale that peace advocates were afraid of—the statements, theories and conjectures made publicly swung from the motherhood, to the plausible, to the downright outrageous. The MILF, for one, made sure it came out with a clean slate, condemning the blasts as "the handiwork of Satan and soulless criminals."

But Emmanuel Piñol, Governor of North Cotabato, put the finger squarely on the rebels. "I hold the MILF responsible for the recent atrocity. I don't know if I can still see them face to face after what happened," he said. He added that the use of 60mm and 81mm mortar ammunition was a "signature of the MILF," and that the incidents themselves were "evil, godless, and full of terror." An incensed MILF chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal called Piñol's tirades "highly unfair."

"Unfair" was also the word used by Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Jesus Dureza to describe Piñol's accusation. "We can't just blame the whole organization of the MILF for the attack if we can't show any proof," he said.

The rebels, in fact, saw a greater theater of counter-insurgency than the twin bombings. Its leaders said they sensed a "renewed plot to demonize and discredit the MILF by linking it or some of its members to terror attacks in the Philippines."

An analyst in their website, Luwaran.com, takes issue with ABS-CBN's re-airing of a program entitled "9/11 Attack: The Philippine Connection." The theories of Maria Ressa, the documentary's author, linking the MILF to terror activities could be "part of over-all efforts to generate a war constituency," says the analyst.

Another MILF official, Sheikh Mohammad Muntassir, blamed other groups for “taking advantage of the uncertainties facing the peace talks,” and warned that such “plotters” and “peace saboteurs” are working to push the two parties towards the path of war.

Things could not have gotten worse, but they did, when a little-known investigation office at the Philippine National Police facilitated the filing of a case for multiple murder against MILF Chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim and eight of his lieutenants. The rebels were being hailed to court for the Makilala bombing. The outspoken Governor Piñol, quoting an alleged informant, had gone as far as saying that Murad had “personally supervised the planning and assembling of the bombs in Camp Usman Ibni Khattab in Magpet, North Cotabato,” went one news story.

Evidence against its leaders were “a wholesale fabrication and a big lie,” sniped the MILF.

That curt assertion conformed to a string of other sympathetic statements: Sultan Kudarat Governor Pax Mangudadatu said the MILF could not have conducted the attacks because these were carried out during the holy month of Ramadhan. True believers of Islam would never desecrate the religion with such barbarism, he said. The government and MILF ceasefire committees also expressed optimism that, despite the legal setback, the two panels would return to negotiation. Surprisingly, even government was not altogether confrontational. Police Director General Oscar Calderon admitted that there was no evidence directly incriminating the rebels. The police chief of Region XII also said that evidence allegedly linking Murad and other MILF leaders to the bombings were “circumstantial,” and that the charges could be dropped if nothing

more substantial could be produced by the prosecution. And Justice Sec. Raul Gonzales gave the assurance that the criminal case should not in any way affect the ongoing peace process.

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#### Peace Monitor

is a monthly publication containing analyses of the GRP-MILF peace process, culled from national and local dailies, as well as from alternative online sources. The monitor also includes efforts and initiatives of government and civil society groups towards peace and development in Mindanao.