



# Peace Monitor

Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao (AFRIM), Inc.

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## Tantrums and tribulations in a fragile peace process



**I**t all began on the heels of two encouraging events: Barely a week before September, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim was thanking outgoing members of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) at his headquarters in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. The IMT has been responsible for monitoring ceasefire agreements between the government and the MILF, and has been credited for drastically bringing down the number of armed clashes to a minimum. On that day when Murad was bidding goodbye to the IMT members, he said he was grateful that the MILF was “not alone in our quest for just and lasting peace in Mindanao.”

Murad especially noted the presence in the gathering of a representative of Japan, which is the first non-Muslim state to join the IMT. Sweden had also signified an interest.

The second event was held in plushier surroundings and was attended by more people. Nur Misuari, Chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), was in Royal Mandaya Hotel in Davao City for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement (FPA). Out on a temporary pass from four years of incarceration,

Misuari came with former President Fidel Ramos, no less, and a coterie of public officials. At the outset, the Chairman was straightforward about his misgivings about the implementation of the FPA, but was quick to resuscitate public frustration. “Let us exhume it (FPA) from the grave,” he said to his cheering audience. The Organization of Islamic Countries was supposedly moving fast to host a tripartite meeting to thresh out the remaining kinks in the accord’s implementation. “It’s a beautiful plan,” he said.

The anniversary rites, although not immune from the usual media flak, left an endearing mark. “Personalities aside, the 1996 accord had its merits. Mindanao had never seen such a turnaround from two decades of incessant fighting. To start with, businessmen from other countries came in droves to explore opportunities in Muslim Mindanao. Within one year after the signing of the peace pact, about 130 investment missions arrived. Compare that with a little over a hundred such missions throughout the three years prior to the Agreement. The international donor community also responded quickly by committing US\$360 million worth of projects for the Special Zones of Peace and Development”.

“The full implementation of the Agreement may yet be completed... Yet, in perspective, the shortcomings of the 1996 accord may be typical, but not insurmountable. At the rate the nation has been comporting itself—half of which is clawing at the Presidency while the other half steals the coffers blind—the meeting of Ramos and Misuari can only be a welcome respite. After all, commemorating such a milestone is a way of preserving its gains. And that, at the end of the day, is what counts the most,” read one editorial.

The positive signals that Misuari and Ramos had generated and the goodwill that Murad had publicly conveyed might have been enough to last the entire month. But then

on 6-7 September, at the 13<sup>th</sup> Exploratory Talks in Kuala Lumpur, negotiations with the MILF broke down. And everything went haywire.

The MILF demanded for more than 1,000 villages in addition to the existing five provinces and one city under the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. But Government balked at the proposition, counter-offered 613 villages, and said that the remaining balance would be decided on after due “constitutional processes.” The rebels slammed the door on the talks.

Even before the Kuala Lumpur meeting, Ghazali Jaafar, the MILF’s deputy chair for political affairs, admitted not having high hopes for the peace process. Addressing his cadres at a seminar organized by the MILF Central Committee, Jaafar said that “negotiation is a tricky undertaking that can create both high expectations and frustrations for people who are not experienced with this process.”

MILF chair Murad Ebrahim declared that “if the government insists to dilly-dally and treat the peace talks as a mere counter-insurgency tool, who can blame the Bangsamoro people if they choose other means to continue their legitimate struggle for freedom and self-determination?”

The MILF peace panel chair, Mohagher Iqbal, warned that the talks were now clouded under “serious uncertainty.” Government is “just dribbling around and allows or insists on implementing socio-economic programs and parallel negotiation on the ground to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of our fighters and destroy the mass base of the MILF.” Manila was “not decisive,” he charged, “and has no real thing to offer to the MILF except rhetoric.” The rebels could “not accept this.”

Silvestre Afable, Jr., government’s peace panel chair, issued a statement saying

that Manila had “presented Constitutional options on the negotiating table consistent with socio-demographic realities and equitable development.” He added that government’s negotiating approach represented “pragmatic peace-building in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and not the outdated counter-insurgency model of the cold war.”

The rebels didn’t seem impressed, which is why civil society’s alarm bells started ringing. Two days after the talks collapsed in Kuala Lumpur, the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) organized an all-Mindanao Leaders’ Peace Consultation to “discuss and propose solutions to break the impasse” in the negotiations. A day after the conference, Catholic and Protestant bishops, *Ulama*, non-governmental organizations and other civil society groups urged government and the MILF to return to the negotiating table. “Dialogue, however long and tedious, is the only humane way of resolving human issues and problems,” the BUC said in a statement.

Grassroots organizations, most of whose members were victims of conflict, were likewise worried. Residents in Carmen, Cotabato expressed fears of being uprooted again once a war breaks out anew. Carmen, Pagalungan, and Pikit were the hardest-hit municipalities in the battles between government troops and the MILF.

As the month wore on, the rebels dropped the tough talk, and admitted they, too, were still pining for peace. Iqbal said they were willing to make a formal appeal to the Catholic bishops so the latter could “intervene to help break the impasse in the peace talks.” Iqbal was of the opinion that the bishops had “considerable influence” over government officials. The same sentiment of wanting the talks to resume was aired at a meeting between the MILF peace panel and the Mindanao People’s Caucus, a peace advocacy group.

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#### Peace Monitor

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