



Peace Monitor

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Spinning the peace yarn

It isn't only the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and the Al-Qaeda that have become buzzwords in the new genre of terrorism that had sprung out of the ruins of New York City in 2001. Inevitably, Islamic groups with a political axe to grind became terrorist suspects, nay, targets of psywar campaigns and outright attacks from their respective governments, if not from Uncle Sam himself.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was no exception. When two bombs ripped through the urban calmness of Davao City in 2003, a bristling Mayor Rodrigo Duterte fingered the MILF as the culprit behind the attacks, even before the allegation was hailed to court.

Loose tongues

The Davao mayor, it seems, wasn't the only one itching to link the MILF to global terror. In April, visiting US officials warned the Arroyo administration that the MILF might be flirting with the ASG. Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita quoted an observation of Admiral William Fallon, head of the US Pacific Command, that the MILF may have conspired with the Jemaah Islamiyah in setting off a string of improvised but powerful bombs across the country.

A month earlier, US Charge d' Affaires Joseph Mussomeli likened Mindanao to Afghanistan, citing the island's supposed predisposition to being "lawless." For that diplomatic *faus pax*, Mussomeli stirred the proverbial hornet's nest and drew flak from Malacanang, Congress, the armed forces, and peace groups—not to mention the MILF itself.

Persona non grata

Presidential spokesman Ignacio Bunye immediately took exception to the label, and said the palace was proceeding as scheduled with the peace process. Congress threatened to declare Mussomeli a persona non grata. Davao First District Congressman and House Majority Leader Prospero Nograles called Mussomeli's statements "uncalled for," while Davao del Sur Congressman Douglas Cagas asserted that the US has "no business" meddling in Philippine affairs.

For his part, AFP spokesman B/Gen. Jose Honrado thought that the Mindanao conflict may be considered "alarming, but not to the extent the Charge d' Affaires has been expounding." A statement from the Mindanao People's Caucus, a network of peace groups, expressed apprehension that Mussomeli may have compromised the ongoing peace talks "into a closed closet or an anti-terror cul-de-sac."

Ancestral domain

As it turned out, the 7th round of exploratory talks pushed through in Port Dickson, Malaysia on April 18-20. Riding high on the crest of goodwill, the talks focused on one of the thorniest issues of the protracted negotiations: ancestral domain.

In a statement believed to be primarily addressed to Washington, President Macapagal-Arroyo stated in a press conference that her administration was going "hammer and tongs against terrorists" even as it was brokering the peace deal.

The president's peace adviser, veteran NGO hand Teresita Deles, virtually ignored the Americans' adverse comments on the country's state of affairs. "Thanks, but no thanks," she quipped in reference to Admiral Fallon's remarks. "The MILF are seriously working with us in building the blocks of peace and final settlement."

"Breakthrough"

Malacanang's straightforwardness and optimism was shared by the international community, not the least among which was Malaysia itself, traditional host for the talks. Foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar urged Washington to refrain from undermining the peace process with allegations that "have no proof." European Union (EU) First Secretary Frank Hess, on the other hand, said that a peace process proceeding with positive results enables the EU to better design its development interventions for Mindanao.

Two days after the talks, government and rebel panels claimed to have achieved "substantial points" on ancestral domain, the purview within which territorial boundaries are determined in the event of an MILF autonomy. Although the panels' announcement of reaching "substantial points" was sketchy, the president extended her kudos for the "breakthrough."

Sleeping with the Enemy

Beneath the glare of publicity over the high-profile talks, however, lingered the old doubts about the MILF's alleged ties with the terrorists. Columnist Ramon Tulfo wrote that there was "nothing wrong" with Mussomeli's statements. "He was just being straightforward." If anything, Manila should even thank the US Charge d' Affaires for "telling the truth," wrote the hard-hitting critic.

But what was perhaps the more sober, but disturbing, interpretation of recent events came from journalist Maria Ressa. Writing for *Newsbreak*, Ressa confirmed that selected MILF territories play host to at least three training camps for the Jemaah Islamiyah. She wrote that the JI has also set up new camps in Liguasan Marsh, Mount Cararao, and Datu Piang. The largest of its groups, continued Ressa, is operating "in the rugged area south of Butig near Mount Cararao, which is controlled by the MILF's 103rd Base Command."

A former investigative reporter for CNN, Ressa notes the increasing sophistication of explosives now being used by terrorists, as well as the strong inclination of the Jemaah Islamiyah "to unite radical members of what were once separate groups, blurring boundaries even further."

To the oft-repeated official refrain that only a few isolated members may have collaborated with the terrorists, but never the organization, Ressa had this to state: "That is not true." Hashim Salamat, the MILF's deceased former chair worked closely with the JI and Al-Qaeda, "to the point that when Osama Bin Laden needed more training camps in 1999, he called the MILF," Ressa pointed out.

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