



# Peace Monitor

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## The carrot and the stick, once again

It would have been any other skirmish in rural Mindanao, except for one detail: the protagonists were members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), erstwhile one of Southeast Asia's most war-beaten insurgents who inked a peace pact with the Ramos administration in 1996.

So when the MNLF descended upon Jolo in early February to attack the 104<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade, government almost couldn't make any sense out of it. But the assault was not only real, it was deadly: The Army immediately returned fire and after ten days, the area was reclaimed. The toll after the fighting, however, was staggering: 60 dead, and some 30,000 civilian evacuees.

President Arroyo was quick to the draw. Quoting "intelligence sources," she publicly claimed founding MNLF Nur Misuari had ordered the attack. Snorting at the swift accusation, Misuari, detained since 2001 on rebellion charges, said the attack was triggered by the recent killing of a Muslim family, including a child, by government soldiers. AFP chief of staff B/Gen. Efren Abu called Misuari's claims "flimsy".

But Misuari was not alone in his defense. A hearing by the House special committee on peace, reconciliation, and national unity bore him out. Committee chair Rep. Satur Ocampo noted that, far from being a field commander, Misuari had been in solitary confinement for the duration of his incarceration. He has no access to communications facilities, much less a cellular phone, through which he could direct field operations.

Chief police superintendent Marcelo Franco, director of the PNP special action forces guarding Misuari, also told mediemen that it was "unlikely" that the MNLF chair was able to smuggle a cellular phone inside his cell, and plan out a major attack with his field commanders without the knowledge of his setries.

But it wasn't only the Jolo attack, said government, that bears the supposedly unseen hand of the MNLF—the bombings last Valentine's Day, also did. Malacañang said the bombings on the Day of Hearts were detonated "in retaliation to attacks versus Muslims, and to force government to bring Misuari to Jolo." In a statement, Misuari said the Valentine's explosions in the cities of Davao, General Santos City and Manila were cut-and-dried terrorist activities, and that, "like oil and water," the MNLF and terrorism are incompatible.

Rather than skirt the issues behind the Jolo attack, he advised government to probe into the alleged massacre of the Muslim family.

But the Arroyo administration believed that Misuari apparently did order the sneak attack, and that he did so for no other reason than to vent his disenchantment at how the provision of the 1996 accord were not being followed.

On this cue, the intelligence community declared that government has "substantially complied" with the conditions of the settlement. This includes the creation and expansion of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, the

establishment of Shariah courts and Madrasah schools, the appointment of Muslims in key government positions, and the substantial infusion of official development assistance for Muslim Mindanao.

For his part, while maintaining that he had nothing to do with the Jolo assault, Misuari did acknowledge alleged violations of the accord, virtually taking government to task for the continued underdevelopment of Muslim Mindanao. He also complained about the fact that, to date, no trial has yet been scheduled on his behalf.

The MNLF must disarm first, declared executive secretary Eduardo Ermita, before any development package may be introduced. Some 7,500 firearms may have already been surrendered alongside MNLF regulars themselves who have been integrated into the armed forces. But thousands of firearms more are unaccounted for, Ermita said. "Millions of dollars" in foreign loans and grants remain in the pipeline, he said, because the rebels didn't turn over most of their guns. He added that the MNLF must appreciate the logic laying down their weapons as part of the peace pact, particularly since 80 percent of the settlement's second phase is winding up and that government is moving decisively into Muslim Mindanao's rehabilitation and development.

Yet the MNLF's commitment to lay down their arms is a curious caveat. What commitment? asked MindaNews columnist Patricio Diaz. The length and breadth of the entire peace accord makes no such stipulation, either in letter or in spirit. Widely hailed to have "surrendered with honor," the Moro rebels had managed to keep their guns as they pledged to work with government in the long and arduous task of rebuilding lives. Ermita's remarks were neither here nor there.

The argument of turning over the guns in exchange for development was also "hollow," wrote Diaz. Mindanao's backwardness has been caused not just by the MNLF's guns but, more importantly, by the critical lack of infrastructure facilities and basic health and education services. For decades, Malacañang neglect of the island has been almost legendary, it would be folly to insist that the entire gamut of underdevelopment were rooted in the Moro

rebels' penchant to carry their firearms. Besides, Diaz added, even if they surrendered their firearms, other groups were still armed—and armed to the teeth: the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf, to name just two of the armed groups now operating across the island.

Whether or not the guns had to be surrendered apparently didn't matter much to House Speaker Jose de Venecia, who took the different tack. Noting that only 254 houses had been erected in Muslim Mindanao since the signing of the accord in 1996, de Venecia announced that the national government will "prioritize the building of 2,000 houses in Sulu." This is part of the 100,000 houses pledged to be built by housing czar Vice President Noli de Castro, he said. De Venecia was pleased to add that already, 82 congressmen had agreed to part with a portion of their controversial pork barrel to help finance the ambitious project.

As always, the "carrot" of dole-outs and the "stick" of development tied to conditions—approaches pioneered by Third World regimes in previous decades—are dangled before perceived "recalcitrant" groups.

Sources:

1. BusinessWorld (February 07, 14, 17 and 28, 2005)
2. MindaNews (February 14 and 25, 2005)
3. Philippine Daily Inquirer (February 20, 23, 24, and 25, 2005)

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