



Peace Monitor

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To dance on the top of a pin

Government and the MILF do an uneasy tango

When the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) formally agreed in December to combat terrorism alongside government, the move spawned mixed reactions. For one thing, peace talks were scheduled to begin in Kuala Lumpur after 17 months of a shaky truce. The joint anti-terror effort appeared to be a mutual measure of goodwill, even if it had all the trappings of a public relations story.

On the other hand, the MILF as anti-terrorist had a credibility problem, having been lumped in the same boat with the Al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf and the Jemaah Islamiyah, notoriously renowned the world over, following the twin Davao bombings in 2003. Although the rebel leadership was mortified by the "unfair accusation", shedding off the label wasn't easy.

This was understandable. In less than a month after the anti-terror campaign was signed, over 200 MILF regulars launched a midnight attack on an Army outpost in Mamasapano, Maguindanao. Right off, MILF vice chair for political affairs Ghadzali Jaafar disowned the attack, saying it was "an independent decision of a few that is totally outside the realm of the MILF." This was corroborated by the military, whose spokesman, B/Gen. Alexander Yano, said that the raid was conducted by Abdulrahman Bides and Ustadz Wahid Tundok, rogue commanders avenging

the death of a relative in a previous encounter. Wahid's brother, an Abu Sayyaf member, was killed in a January 7 firefight.

Worst Attack

Whatever the account is, the January 9 late evening incident was "the worst attack" by Muslim rebels in over a year and a half of relative peace, according to a Reuters report. The rebels, after all, were armed to the teeth, having purchased over P2.2 million worth of M-16 rifles and grenades from North Korea from 1999 to 2002. But at daybreak, the Army returned the favor, unleashing 150 howitzers and 250-pound OB-10 bombs in areas it believed the rebels were hiding. All in all, the tit-for-tat violence triggered the evacuation of more than 5,800 civilian families.

But if the displacement of whole communities merited decisive action, this sense of emergency was lost on the armed forces and the MILF, who were busy debating over whether not the perpetrators of the attack should be turned over to the government.

Citing ceasefire provisions, the MILF rejected a 72-hour deadline imposed by the military, within which it should surrender the raiders. Gen. Yano warned that if the MILF refused to comply with the deadline and produce the raiders,

the military would "hunt them down" like common criminals.

No bodies

The raiders were never surrendered, which raised doubts about the MILF's ability to keep its members in tow. Soon enough, government took the cue. "Tapusin nyo na ang laban," ordered Mindanao Affairs Secretary Jesus Dureza, addressing the military. Towards the end of January, helicopter gunships pounded Butilan Marsh in Maguindanao. A military communiqué consequently reported killing 48 rebels and two Indonesian nationals identified with the Jemaah Islamiyah. The MILF said it found no bodies after the incident.

That no bodies were admitted to have been found after a major bombing campaign may be par for the course in political negotiations. But this notion of charade may be academic in view of a media observation made on the conduct of the 24th meeting of the joint GRP-MILF Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities at a plush Davao hotel, barely three days after the Mamasapano attack. Mindanews reported that despite the tension brought about by the raid, "the mood among representatives from the government and the MILF was cordial. During the break following the opening statements, staff members from both sides were seen laughing and cracking jokes."

The atmosphere at the chic meeting may have been genuinely congenial. Yet it raises suspicions that key players in the peace process may not be altogether transparent, that the people may be skipping a beat in their appreciation of current events.

Whose Development?

And nowhere was such an ominous prospect better articulated than in the syndicated column of Patricio Diaz, who posited that government

and the Muslim rebels may not have the same objectives after all in pursuing a settlement.

The Moro people want peace "based on justice", Diaz wrote, meaning, "peace anchored on self-determination, lands for the Muslims, and compensation for the lands they claimed to have been unjustly taken from them." But government apparently has other plans, bent as it is with appeasing foreign investors in the agribusiness and mining industries itching to occupy virtually limitless tracts of land.

"Peace for development is primarily for the benefit of the national government and the investors," continued Diaz, a Titus Brandsma awardee for principled journalism. "Can Muslims claim as their benefit their being laborers on their own lands?"

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