



Peace Monitor

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In hot pursuit

Terrorists remain elusive, as does a peace pact

"Small fish," sniped the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on the alleged Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members arrested by government troops early July. The three suspects were charged with planting the bombs in key Mindanao cities that killed dozens of civilians between 2001 and 2003. But the rebel group, working with Malacañang in hunting down terrorists, said the suspects were merely foot soldiers in the vast network of terrorism, and that the three were not even in its list of 52 terrorists believed to be operating in Mindanao.

Unmindful of, or perhaps piqued by, the MILF's belittling statement, the military deployed two battalions to hunt down no more than a band of 30 ASG members. The group, led by Khaddafy Janjalani, reportedly harbors Indonesian nationals and was believed to be prowling the hills of Datu Piang and Datu Saudi Ampatuan in Maguindanao, and along the tri-boundaries of South Upi, Talayan, and Datu Odin Sinsuat.

But despite the military contingent, said to be complemented by American Special Forces, little progress was made; ASG spokesman Jainal Sali, or Abu Solaiman was wounded. This has fueled speculations of collusion between some military personnel and the terrorists. Janjalani and Solaiman both carry a PhP5 million bounty on their heads.

As a direct result of the massive assault, thousands of farmers evacuated from the affected towns, at a time when their upland rice was due for harvest.

They were reported to be temporarily housed in schools and barangay halls in nearby areas.

Meanwhile, the GRP-MILF peace talks ground to a halt. Panels from both sides were fairly confident that negotiations would resume after the 8th round of exploratory talks last June in Kuala Lumpur. Their joint communiqué announced the holding of the 9th round in July, also in Malaysia, which is the official host of the roundtable talks. On the heels of covering details on ancestral domain in June, the panels were expected to open discussion on the whole issue of governance during the 9th round. These were to be the last remaining hurdles before formal peace talks could begin.

But in an unexpected twist of events, Malaysia suddenly called off the talks. Government and the MILF at first denied Kuala Lumpur had issued an equivocal notice. "There was no schedule yet, so there was nothing to cancel," quipped GRP chief negotiator Silvestre Afable.

But no sooner than the palace doused speculations of a diplomatic faux pas than MILF chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal said he received official notice of the postponement on July 22. Asked about whether or not he believed the talks would resume soon, he said "We have no idea. We will just wait."

Which was strange, to say the least. Malaysia has been a key player in the talks as host, not as unilateral arbiter. For all its benevolence, Kuala Lumpur was looked upon by both sides as an active supporter of the GRP-MILF peace process. But

there was hardly any precedent that suggested it could suspend the talks without concurrence from either party.

MILF's Eid Kabalu lamely commented that whatever it was on Malaysia's mind that prompted the suspension, the MILF remained committed to the talks. "*Ang MILF ready naman e. But we leave it at that para hindi na lumaki ang issue,*" he said in a statement.

The "issue" may have been relegated to the background. But the questions remain: Why would Malaysia unilaterally decide on the fate of the talks? And how could the two parties accede to her decision? Was it because of Malaysia's critical role as a third party mediator that neither party could do away with? Granting that, what could have spooked her to have called the talks off?

The only single Philippine development at the time that could have sent warning signals to the international community was the so-called Gloria-gate scandal. Opposition groups have drummed up horror scenarios painted by investors and tourists, ostensibly to demonstrate the president's eroding capacity to hold her court. Among these groups was the National Democratic Front (NDF), which slammed the door to a negotiated settlement after news broke out that President Arroyo had apologized for an indiscretion.

"So long as it stays in power," said the NDF's Jose Ma. Sison, "the Arroyo regime will continue to prevent the resumption of the formal talks in the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations." Speaking from his home in The Hague, Sison proceeded to spew a mouthful: "These callous enemies of the Filipino people must be defeated by the mass movement. They are against the people's demands for national liberation, democracy, development, social justice, and durable peace. They have consistently sabotaged the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations."

The MILF, however, didn't share the same ideological harangue. In fact, that it was steadfast about securing a peace deal could not have been overemphasized amidst Gloria-gate. As the

controversy rocked Malacanang, the MILF declared it would remain sober. Mohagher Iqbal said the nature of the issues hurled against the president was "strictly internal" to her official family, and that the MILF was negotiating "with government, not with personalities."

This only beclouds Malaysia's unilateral decision even more. For if there were no indications that the level of commitment of the two parties was diminishing, with what basis could their avowed mediator act otherwise? With the MILF's categorical rebuke of destabilization, Kuala Lumpur could only have felt that the political leadership was probably bound to collapse, hence it suspended the initial negotiations with Manila.

Sources:

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