



Peace Monitor

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Are they or aren't they?

The MILF parries off persistent claims of terrorism

As if the slow pace of the peace process wasn't bad enough, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) found itself at the defensive end of persistent allegations that it maintains covert ties with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

A report from the US Congressional Research Service claimed that the MILF provides training facilities for the terrorists. Another American think tank, the US Institute for Peace, said that "seven hard-core first-generation leaders" of the JI who trained with the Al-Qaeda were in Mindanao.

The Institute's Zachary Abuza said he was "troubled" with the scenario, adding that he couldn't "believe they were there without MILF support." To cap his speculations, Abuza declared that the MILF was "in danger" of being included in the US' terror list, on the mere strength of the allegations of its ties with the JI.

Recycled

The rebel group, of course, denied the tag for the nth time. Spokesman Eid Kabalu dismissed the claims as "recycled," and cited a letter sent to the late MILF chairman Hashim Salamat by George W. Bush, no less. The conservative US President had "recognized the MILF as a legitimate group pursuing legitimate grievances," said Kabalu, who might as well have asked how lesser mortals in America could have

second-guessed their own leader, who is not even a Democrat.

Besides, the MILF spokesman wanted to know, if the Moro rebels were harboring the ASG or the JI, why would it form an Adhoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) with government last year to run after terrorists? It did just that—a partnership that paid off with the release of two kidnap victims in Lanao del Norte.

Even President Arroyo was unconvinced of the buzz from Washington. Asked by reporters if she believed the MILF was secretly operating with the ASG or the JI, she retorted: "Not the MILF that we are in peace talks with." Washington, she added, should be "the last one" to put the MILF on its terror list because as far as she knew, the US was supportive of the peace process. It just didn't wash.

Who benefits?

Which is why the US think tanks' speculations were curious. Why would anyone insist on tagging the MILF as terrorists, knowing that such a stigma would wreak serious, if not irreparable, damage to the peace process? Who would benefit if a political settlement remained elusive, if government continued to "dribble the ball" of negotiations while a shooting war displaced thousands in the countryside?

Certainly not the rebels, who appear to be weary with the fighting, which is more than anyone can say of the MNLF. Nur Misuari's ragtag remnants, heavily shelled in Sulu, announced a declaration of war against the government. Unable to resist the temptation to announce that it was predisposed neither to terrorism nor to someone else's war, the MILF rebutted the MNLF's saber-rattling. Eid Kabalu stated that the MNLF had "no moral ground" to wage a war, having lost its reason for existence after its 1996 peace agreement with Manila.

Battle-fatigue

That battle-fatigue has apparently pervaded its ranks may only be inevitable for the MILF, which was scheduled in April to talk peace in renewed talks with government in Kuala Lumpur.

Some 100,000 lives have been sacrificed over the last 30 years of fighting, costing the government more than P100 billion in taxpayers money. Help from donor agencies have been steady, but these are hardly meaningful in terms of sustainable impact on people's lives.

Carabaos and other farm animals have been dispersed by donor-assisted programs to Muslim communities across the island, but in the long term, incomes derived from alternative livelihoods have barely improved family welfare. Even novel ideas, such as the one in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao wherein a banana plantation employs rebel returnees, are few and far between and have not contributed to the building of a critical mass of empowered communities.

Military madness

The scenario of cyclical helplessness is not made any better by the military, whose long years of fighting protracted battles have taken their toll on its efficiency. In the February bloodbath in Sulu, soldiers were vainly ducking from mortar shells fired from rebel vehicles, a heretofore unheard-of tactic by the MNLF. Ill-equipped even of helmets and bulletproof vests,

the Army had no surgical facilities in the area, even if its commanders were well aware that their men were there on a major operation.

And under whose allegiance did they offer their lives? The Flag's, naturally, whose officialdom believes the Misuari gadflies, whatever their misgivings are with Malacanang, should be cut down to size.

Against this backdrop of peace overtures and Phyric victories, terrorism, or the indiscriminate propagation of its specter, can only blur our perspectives—a prospect that our negotiators in Kuala Lumpur need, only too surely, like a hole in the head.

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