



Peace Monitor

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‘Renewed hope’



Pronouncements of the two heads of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines-Moro Islamic Liberation Front (GRP-MILF) peace panels once again bring hope for peace following the aborted signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in 2008.

MILF Peace Panel Chair Mohagher Iqbal wrote “The aborted signing of the MOA-AD was not the end of the long journey to peace in Mindanao.” Former GRP Peace Panel Chair Rodolfo Garcia responded, “Perhaps, we should build from the ashes of the MOA...having reached this far and accomplished so much”(Santos, 2009a).

These indeed are encouraging because the escalation of the armed conflict in Central Mindanao, Northern Mindanao and Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao resulted in the displacement of more than 600,000 persons, 250 million worth of damages in infrastructure and agriculture, and more than 200 casualties. Various government agencies and some local and international nongovernment organizations have focused their efforts in the provision of humanitarian assistance to the displaced persons such as emergency relief assistance, financial assistance, early recovery and rehabilitation program, among others. As of March, about 400,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) have returned to their homes. Ninety five thousand IDPs remain in 124 evacuation areas in eight provinces of Mindanao. Majority of them are in the provinces of Maguindanao; Lanao del Sur and Shariff Kabunsuan. On the other hand, 128,000 displaced persons are still living with their relatives and friends. These realities further threatened the resumption of peace talks (NDCC, 2009).

Since then, the government has shifted its strategy to demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR). The MILF countered that these should be done after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Compact

rather than as a precondition of the peace talks. While some government agencies and civil society groups diverted their efforts towards the reconstruction of conflict-affected areas, others focused on the conduct of information campaigns and peace dialogues to enhance peoples' understanding of the historical context of the Mindanao conflict and develop broader constituency to push the peace process forward.

Perspectives on the resumption of peace talks

From the MILF

Attending an international conference in March, MILF peace panel member Maulana Alonto said that the GRP must have a strong political will, sincerity and commitment for the peace talks to move forward. The GRP must also stop its counter-insurgency activities such as military operations that somehow contribute to human rights violations and repress Bangsamoro's right to self-determination. He emphasized that the Mindanao problem is not a conflict between Christians and Muslims but rather a conflict between justice and injustice, thereby urging the CSOs and peace advocates to take a stand for justice and not to stay on the neutral side" (Alonto, 2009).

Alonto also cited the following as incompatibilities on the MILF and GRP agenda that stall the peace talks: 1) the MOA-AD was not mentioned in the GRP's agenda while the MILF placed it as top priority 2) the GRP allegedly wanted to replace Malaysia as the facilitator of the peace talks while the MILF insisted on retaining Malaysia as the peace talks facilitator; 3) MILF demanded for suspension of all military operations against the MILF commanders to avoid further displacement of people in conflict-affected areas.

Though it may sound peaceful in Central Mindanao nowadays, AFP's alleged operations against the MILF commanders in the countryside continue (Gallardo, 2009). Despite all these incompatibilities, Alonto clarified that "war is not an option for the MILF, but it is the resumption of peace talks" (Alonto, 2009).

Needless to say, the MILF remains skeptic on the GRP's decision to drop as conditionality the surrender of the

MILF commanders and announce the resumption of peace talks as soon as possible. The MILF questions whether these decisions were made as a response to the call for peace and demands of international donor agencies or in preparation for the upcoming presidential elections (Luwaran, 2009a).

From the GRP

According to Secretary Avelino Razon, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, the GRP has completely reconstituted its new all-Mindanaoan GRP peace panel in January though no specific date has been set for the resumption of the talks. The GRP has dropped its condition for the surrender of the so-called three MILF rogue commanders. It has also considered the MILF conditions outlined by Alonto earlier (Razon, 2009).

The GRP has also presented its new three-R agenda: **Renegotiate, Reaffirm and Review** in addition to DDR. To conclude discussions on the MOA-AD, GRP will try to **renegotiate** it considering the Supreme Court's guidelines and decision that the said document is important in carrying out the 2001 GRP-MILF Tripoli Peace Agreement. It also sees the closure on MOA-AD discussion as necessary in the resumption of peace talks and in starting the negotiation on the Comprehensive Peace Compact. The peace talks' resumption will **reaffirm** GRP's principle on the primacy of the peace process. Thus, reiterating that the government's efforts were geared towards going back to the negotiating table. The GRP panel also considers a **review** of the nature and structure of Malaysia's facilitation process and will accept proposals on the involvement of eminent persons in the resumption of the peace talks. With the 3R agenda, DDR will not be a precondition of the talks but rather an important component of the resumption of peace talks (Ibid).

From civil society organizations and peace advocates

Lawyer Camilo "Bong" Montessa, the former head of the GRP-Technical Working Group (2003-2007) raised the importance of leveling off on the concept of Bangsamoro struggle and the Mindanao problem among the panel members of both parties.

Having a unified understanding on the historical, political and cultural background of the Mindanao armed conflict could lead to possible solutions towards a genuine and lasting peace in Mindanao. Further, this common understanding

somehow determines the success or failure of a peace negotiation, besides the negotiating strategy, coalition building, public diplomacy, among others (Montessa, 2009).

On the other hand, Professor Rudy Rodil, former vice-chair of the GRP peace panel and an expert on Moro and indigenous peoples' histories emphasizes the role of the three groups of people in Mindanao in the conflict and suggests that people should divert energy and focus instead on the younger generation of Moro, IPs and settlers. The younger generation tends to have a better understanding and deeper respect for cultural diversity (Rodil, 2009). He also asserted the importance of a leader's political will in any peace process. Rodil mentioned the role of former president Fidel V. Ramos in the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the GRP and Moro National Liberation Front. In spite of the public's negative response particularly on the creation of the Southern Philippines Development Authority, he stood by his decision to forge peace with the MNLF (Tesiorna, 2009).

Relatedly, Fr. Eliseo Mercado, former GRP peace panel member also said that trust in leadership is important in forging a peace agreement (Estremera, 2009). According to human rights lawyer and peace advocate Soliman Santos (2009b), the key factors to a negotiated political settlement are political will, peace policy and public constituency. Also, the International Crisis Group, a leading non-partisan source of analysis and advice to governments and intergovernmental bodies supports these views, stating the impossibility of the peace talks resumption before the end of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's term due to "numerous potential spoilers and weak political will" (Luwaran, 2009b).

Prof. Abhoud Syed Lingga of the Institute for Bangsamoro Studies in Cotabato City recommends a constitutional amendment to accommodate the MOA-AD, especially on the provisions on the power sharing of the GRP and the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (Arguillas, 2009a).

CSOs' peacebuilding efforts

Peace advocates and CSOs have been conducting massive information dissemination and campaigns on the historical context of the Bangsamoro struggle to promote deeper understanding of the Bangsamoro struggle and encourage the formation of a broader peace constituency.

Government's new strategy in handling the peace process includes the conduct of community dialogues. It has tapped

the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) to hold regional consultations in coordination with state universities and Catholic schools from April to May 2009.

Dubbed *Konsult Mindanaw*, the initiative entails holding of focus group discussions with at least 6,000 participants from Mindanao and Southern Palawan and among Moro residents in other parts of the country. In January to March 2009, the BUC produced campaign materials related to the consultation and the peace process such as comics, brochures, and posters (Alejo, 2009).

Although the MILF does not oppose the conduct of consultations, and in fact promotes grassroots consultation as part of their peace efforts, it stresses that results would not be credible when the research utilizes government funds and resources or gets input from government on the design and conduct of consultations (Arguillas, 2009b). Further, the MILF says that "consultation should be tuned to advocacy of the peace process in order to guide communities in their course of actions" (Luwaran, 2009c). Seemingly contradicting its position on the dialogues, the MILF declares that decision still lies on the leaders of both peace panel despite the input from community dialogues.

On 16-17 March, peace advocates in Mindanao and outside the country convened in an international conference in Davao City to signify solidarity and support to the Bangsamoro struggle. Organized by the Mindanao People's Caucus, the conference aimed to bring the issues of the Bangsamoro people to the international community. Discussions and presentations focused on the Mindanao armed conflict, the Bangsamoro struggle and on updates of the GRP-MILF peace negotiations.

Broader peace process

The non-signing of the MOA-AD has paved the way for discourses to address issues of other groups of people in Mindanao such as that of the indigenous peoples and the migrant settlers.

Quoting Prof. Rodil (2009), he identified three "major political conflicts in Mindanao", (1) "Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination; (2) indigenous peoples' assertion of their own distinct identity and fight (unarmed) for self-determination and; (3) struggle for

national liberation from the imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism". As the Bangsamoro fight for their sovereignty, the IPs are also asserting their rights over their ancestral domains as provided for in the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA). With the possible inclusion of these ancestral domains under the proposed BJE, possible conflict and misunderstanding might erupt between the IPs and Moros.

Farmers and farmworkers in Mindanao (most of whom are third and fourth generation descendants of immigrants from Luzon and the Visayas) are asserting ownership of the land they till and at the same time calling for the extension of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program until the completion of its targets.

There is a growing understanding of the struggle of marginalized groups in Mindanao, their assertion of their rights to land and self determination. Further, the MOA-AD has also opened doors in broadening the peace process, thus bringing in more people and hearing more voices from the margins.

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A monthly analyses on the updates of the peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF. It also contains issues involving efforts of the government and the civil society towards peace and development in Mindanao.

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