

# Peace in Mindanao – at What Price?

(First of two parts)  
 By Bobby Tuazon

## Bringing the MILF to the Peace Talks

Peace is not just the absence of war. It is the outcome of settling an armed conflict by addressing its fundamental roots toward a just and lasting peace. Unless the causes are addressed, any peace that is forged is just a means of preserving an unjust status quo leading to bigger tensions.

In the old days, peace terms were prescribed by victorious states and armies in a war or armed conflict; the terms usually included disarming the vanquished and dismembering territories. The impositions in the treaties that ended the two major world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century yielded no lasting peace: World War I led to World War II, and the latter was followed by the so-called “cold war” and thereafter by the permanent and borderless “war on terrorism.”

In the Philippines, the ongoing peace talks between the Arroyo government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fits into a peace process paradigm developed by capitalist countries led by the United States. Sometimes referred to as globalization-driven, the peace process – somewhat similar to the UN’s “peace building,” “conflict resolution” or “dispute settlement” – purportedly aims to address the core issues of the Bangsamoro problem, namely, the Moro people’s ancestral domain claim and self-rule.

The trouble is, not all “peace processes” are success stories as advocates and current political literature on this paradigm admit. In fact, the backlash generated by a controversial Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD), which is a product of this peace process, and the resumption of hostilities are imperiling the peace talks between the GRP and MILF.

## Two major peace talks

The centuries-long Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination – in terms of having a separate and independent state – has gone through two major peace negotiations with the government. The first, held with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), traversed through 20 years ending in the

1996 final peace accord that has been criticized as inadequate in building autonomy and development for the ARMM. The second, with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), started in 1997 with an agreement on the cessation of hostilities followed by the Tripoli agreement of 2001. Unfolding in this second process are seemingly irreconcilable interests representing not only the MILF and GRP but also the local elite, investors, and foreign governments.

In the GRP-MNLF peace talks, a confluence of events – on the part of the Marcos regime the economic crisis and the need to tap Middle East countries for oil and market for cheap Filipino labor, and, on the MNLF military setbacks and the gradual loss of armed support from Libya and other OIC countries – drove both parties to enter into a negotiated political settlement. In the early phase, however, a faction of the MNLF that disagreed with the peace talks, led by Salamat Hashim, formed the MILF in 1977. The MILF has been the main revolutionary Moro group with its armed component, Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), consistently fighting for secession.

The MILF suffered a major setback when 50 of its military camps were destroyed by the AFP in the total war unleashed by then President Joseph Estrada in 2000 and again, when the Buliok complex which replaced Camp Abubakar as the rebels’ central headquarters, came under heavy military offensive – in violation of a truce – in February 2003. Government offensives forced the MILF’s positional warfare units to disperse into smaller, clan-led guerrilla forces.

Although intelligence reports say that the BIAF is still 15,000-strong with 11,000 firearms, the MILF’s fighting spirit appeared to have reached what some security analysts call a “hurting stalemate” which can go either to extremism by its dispersed units or to a prolonged armed engagement without any prospects of winning. Aside from economic losses and other reasons, the Arroyo government pursued the peace talks in a bid to silence the guns of the MILF – which had been put into effect in the 1997 ceasefire agreement – in order to concentrate on its strategic

*The peace process can bring about a simulated peace – but not the final solution to the Bangsamoro people’s historic and just grievances.*

offensives against the New People’s Army in a vain attempt to put it into irrelevance by 2010.

## Ripe time

By 2003, the time was ripe for giving momentum to the “peace process.” The MILF faced the threat of having its inclusion in the U.S. government’s list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) renewed and, hence, foreign support from Muslim countries being reduced. An exchange of communications between MILF Chair Salamat Hashim<sup>2</sup> and U.S. President George Bush followed in early 2003, paving the way for U.S. participation in the peace talks. Further legitimizing U.S. participation was an official request by Arroyo for U.S. assistance in the peace talks.

Since Malaysia was the official facilitator of the talks being held in Kuala Lumpur, U.S. role was through the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), a quasi-state agency created by an act of Congress. Washington promised an initial \$30 million aid package to the MILF subject, however, to the latter’s signing a final peace agreement. The USIP’s Philippine Facilitation Project, which allowed U.S. state department authorities a direct access to the MILF including its military camps, lasted from 2003-2007. Since then, U.S. liaison with the MILF has been continued by the state department and its embassy in Manila.

Meantime, Malaysia, Libya, and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) tried to persuade the MILF to drop its secessionist goal, work for an expanded autonomy and, at one point, to adjust its hard position against the constitutional framework of the negotiations. This stance complemented the USIP’s peace formula regarding an expanded autonomy with legal authority for the MILF and for the GRP to soften its constitutional rigidity.

The MoA-AD, the signing of which was aborted by a Supreme Court (SC) temporary restraining order, articulates a compromise deal with the MILF in which its historical ancestral domain claim is recognized by the government in principle but makes its actualization conditional. The implementation of this claim, along with the ownership of natural resources and the exercise of jurisdictional authority, will need to pass through the gauntlet of more contentious negotiations leading up to the Comprehensive Compact, plebiscite, and a constitutional amendment that will establish a federal system. More importantly, the agreement binds the MILF to honor private landholdings, corporate plantations, foreign investments particularly in energy resources, as well as the presence of foreign forces in Bangsamoro.

**(End of Part I; To be continued on the October 2008 issue)**

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