

Philippine government renews its communal war in Mindanao

The US role

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An offensive by the Philippine military to seize areas of southern Mindanao island controlled by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is now in its seventh week.

Initially the offensive was dressed up as a “police action” to arrest two MILF commanders accused of attacks that killed dozens and displaced thousands last month in two of Mindanao’s provinces—Lanao Del Norte and North Cotabato. By the end of August, however, more than 6,000 Philippine soldiers and policemen were engaged in operations against 3,000 MILF rebels that extended into the neighbouring provinces of Maguindanao and Sarangani.

The military has used aerial and artillery bombardments indiscriminately. According to the Commission on Human Rights, at least 20 civilians were killed in August as a result. Early this month, war planes bombed wooden boats loaded with civilians fleeing from a military assault on their village. According to local officials, a pregnant woman and two children were among the six dead.

According to the *Sun Star* on September 16, the military was ordered to stop the use of air and artillery strikes after the Mindanao Peoples Caucus made an appeal to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. The military has refused to comply, however, insisting they have received no such orders.

The National Disaster Coordinating Council reported, as of September 12, that more than 300,000 people have fled their homes, 71 people have been killed and nearly 100 injured. Damage to homes, crops and infrastructure was estimated at more than \$US2 million.

Other reports indicate that up to 300 people have been killed in ongoing fighting. The World Food Program estimated last week that around 500,000 people have been displaced and are in need of food, shelter and medicine. Responding to comments last week by Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita that the situation in Mindanao was “not that bad,” Oxfam country director Lan Mercado said: “The humanitarian needs in Mindanao are real. The armed conflict caused suffering for civilians and worsened their experience of poverty.”

Mercado cited cases of mothers risking their lives to return to villages in the middle of the conflict to find food for their children. Evacuees were selling everything, including their farm animals, just to survive. “It is civilians who lose the most in times of conflict. Women, in particular, are hit the hardest as they take care of the well-being of the family amidst uncertainty,” she said.

Southern Mindanao is among the poorest regions in the Philippines. Nationwide, as of 2000, 34 percent of the population was below the official poverty line. In some parts of the region, the situation is even worse—in Sarangani and North Cotabato, the incidence of poverty is 51.5 percent, in Lanao Del Norte 55.5 percent and in Maguindanao 61.3 percent.

Following the launching of the offensive, President Arroyo ended earlier

negotiations with the MILF for a political settlement, dismissing her negotiating panel on September 3. This followed an announcement, according to *MindaNews*, of a “shift” in the government’s focus from negotiations to the demand for “armed groups to give up armed struggle”—in other words, toward a renewal of the civil war that has already lasted more than two decades.

The Arroyo regime has junked an initial agreement with the MILF that had provoked uproar, particularly in Mindanao, when it was announced in July. The agreement, meant to be the framework for a final political settlement, would have eventually included the establishment of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) with expanded powers over its local economy and natural resources and the authority to make international trade agreements.

While the proposed regional autonomy was limited, the deal provoked furious opposition from sections of the Filipino political establishment which regarded it as an impermissible concession to the MILF’s separatist demands. In Mindanao itself, entrenched interests fought a bitter rearguard campaign against the deal. In the run-up to the August 5 formal signing of the agreement in Malaysia, opponents mounted protests in the cities of Cotabato, Iligan and Zamboanga and finally obtained a Supreme Court order restraining the Arroyo administration from signing.

The Arroyo regime, which relies heavily on political support in Mindanao, made no effort to fight the opponents of the deal. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), controlled by a pro-Arroyo Muslim politician, a bitter opponent of the MILF, delivered an estimated 50 percent of Arroyo’s winning margin in the 2004 presidential elections. The local politicians in North Cotabato and Zamboanga are also Arroyo supporters and the current house speaker, another key ally, is from Mindanao. Faced with mounting political opposition, the Arroyo administration ignored the conflict resolution mechanisms in the existing ceasefire and launched a “police action” against the rebel MILF commanders.

Nationalist campaign

In the aftermath of the aborted peace deal and renewed war, the Filipino press whipped up a virulent nationalist campaign with an undertone of anti-Muslim prejudice, branding the agreement as unconstitutional and a threat to the unity of the nation state. The *Philippine Star* on August 7 denounced the MILF for its “track record shot through with violence and mayhem, of treachery and duplicity”. The *Business Mirror* compared the aborted agreement with “the appeasement resorted to by Neville

Chamberlain when he surrendered the Sudetenland of pre-World War II Czechoslovakia to Adolf Hitler”.

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on August 15 lambasted the agreement for offering the MILF “extraordinary (and rankly unconstitutional) concessions, including a new political theory (‘associative character’) to justify the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity’s greater autonomy, and the privilege of establishing ‘foreign missions’, a privilege explicitly disallowed in the Organic Act that created the BJE’s predecessor, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao”.

Some politicians, such as Senator Joker Arroyo, played on the fact that the US had helped facilitate the negotiations with the MILF. Posturing as opponents of US imperialism, they claimed that the deal would enable the US military to establish bases in southern Mindanao by sidestepping the Philippine constitution and dealing directly with the BJE. Such politicians have not objected previously to the presence of US forces that assisted the military wage war in southern Mindanao.

Business groups also came out squarely against the proposed agreement. The *Philippine Star* reported the Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) as opposing “any attempt to dismember our country by laying the foundation for the creation of an independent and sovereign Bangsamoro state”. The influential Makati Business Club denounced the deal for setting “aside the time-honored principles of sanctity of contract and inviolability of vested rights to grant the Bangsamoro juridical entity the power to modify, revise, and even supersede significant long-term contracts and agreements duly entered into by relevant government authorities and private parties”.

While the Arroyo regime has now plunged the region back into conflict, there was nothing progressive about the US-sponsored peace process or the now defunct agreement. Far from ending the discrimination and economic oppression of the Muslim population, the deal was an attempt to reach a power-sharing arrangement between the political establishment in Manila and sections of the Muslim bourgeoisie in southern Mindanao. In return for giving up its demand for a separate Muslim statelet, the MILF leadership was being offered a junior role in the joint exploitation of the working masses and resources of the region.

What is at stake is considerable. According to the National Statistics Coordination Board, Mindanao contributed 17.7 percent of the gross domestic product in 2006. The region produced 48 percent of the country’s gold, 63 percent of its nickel and held 18 percent of its charcoal reserves. It dominated the production of rubber, pineapple, cacao, banana, coffee, corn and coconut, and produced more than 40 percent of food requirements and 30 percent of food exports. It also supplied 90 percent of the country’s timber.

In addition, the region has significant energy reserves. The Liguasan marsh in central Mindanao, which is currently under MILF control, has an estimated 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. Just off Mindanao, in the Sulu Sea, there are an estimated 67 million barrels of oil and 228 billion cubic feet of gas reserves, according to the Philippine energy department in 2002.

The US role

No credence can be placed in Washington’s posturing as a peacemaker in the conflict. The US promotion of peace talks in the Philippines, like its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is driven by American strategic and economic interests. As war erupted in the 1970s, the US provided the dictator Ferdinand Marcos with more than \$US500 million in military assistance to bolster the Philippine army in its attacks on the Mindanao rebels. An estimated 120,000 people have been killed in the conflict and

many more have been displaced, including 200,000 refugees in Sabah in Malaysia.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration, with the assistance of President Arroyo, seized on the opportunity to extend its bogus “war on terrorism” into the Philippines. Between 2002 and 2006, the US gave \$250 million to the Philippine military, equivalent to nearly 10 percent of its budget. The US has not only provided money, but under the guise of various military exercises and training programs, as well as civilian aid, has established a significance presence in Mindanao.

The US supported peace talks with the MILF in 2003 as part of a broader strategy to split the armed rebellion. The initial target of the “war on terrorism” was the smaller Abu Sayyaf, which had links to the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network and, like JI, had been initiated by veterans of the CIA-backed holy war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The purpose of talks with the MILF and various aid programs was to cultivate more moderate MILF leaders while isolating Abu Sayyaf and its MILF sympathisers. The Bush administration dangled \$30 million in economic aid to the MILF once an agreement was signed.

At the same time, however, Malaysia, which was acting on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, had blocked the US from direct participation in the talks. The US therefore worked through the US Institute of Peace (USIP)—an organisation founded and funded by US Congress—as well as its embassy in Manila. The USIP established links with MILF leaders and their business and religious supporters. Writing on the *Asia Times* web site, analyst Herbert Docena explained that the USIP was engaged in a “deliberate political project to build relations with, build the capacity of, and build unity among those moderate pro-US Moros in an attempt to make them better resourced and more influential than the alternatives”.

By late 2007, the US government had apparently already drawn the conclusion that the Arroyo regime was incapable of pushing through any agreement. Accordingly, US Ambassador Kristie Kenney ended the USIP’s facilitation work late last year. At the same time, Kenney kept Washington’s options open by making a widely publicised visit to an MILF camp in February where she met the MILF chairman Al Haj Murad for the first time and offered more developmental aid.

The Bush administration has deepened its involvement in Mindanao for several purposes. In the first place, US corporations are seeking to exploit the region’s resources. In June, for example, Exxon Mobil announced a \$100 million deal to explore for offshore oil in the Sulu Sea just off Mindanao.

Far more significant, however, are American strategic aims which above all seek to contain the growing economic influence and potential military presence of China within the region. Having been forced to abandon the huge Subic Bay Naval base and Clark Airfield in 1991, Washington has long sought to reestablish a military presence in its former colony, if on a somewhat smaller scale.

Under the Arroyo administration, the US military has achieved some of its objectives, including the signing of a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) and a quasi-permanent US troop presence in Mindanao under the guise of training and various aid projects. Between 300 and 500 US Special Forces troops have been present in Mindanao since 2002, operating from a joint task force headquarters in Zamboanga City. In addition, joint training exercises are on the rise. In 2006 alone, according to Docena, “up to 37 military exercises were scheduled—up from around 24 in the preceding years. As many as 6,000 US troops are involved, depending on the exercise.”

Equally important, the US has built or upgraded dual-use (military and civilian) facilities in Mindanao and other parts of the country. “In General Santos City,” Docena writes, “the US constructed a deep-water port and one of the most modern airports in the country, connected to each other by one of the country’s best roads. In Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, where

US troops routinely exercise, the airport has been renovated and its runway strengthened to carry the weight of C-130 planes (Nueva Ecija is in Luzon Island). In Sulu, the US is renovating the airport, upgrading roads, and building ports that can berth huge ships.”

Whatever the final outcome of the renewed conflict with the MILF, the US has already quietly secured its major aims—the reestablishment of close ties with the Philippine armed forces, an agreement that allows the US military access to the country’s ports, airfields and other facilities as required, the upgrading of these facilities in Mindanao, and what is effectively a small forward base manned by Special Forces troops. While the Pentagon has relations with a number of other South East Asian countries, nowhere are they as developed as in the Philippines.



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