

Heavy fighting in Southern Philippine city

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Fighting continued for the tenth day between government security forces and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) rebels in Zamboanga, a southern Philippine city and the 6th largest in the country, with a population of over 800,000. The number of MNLF fighters involved in the conflict has been severely reduced from 200 at its onset to an estimated 50 remaining combatants. Over 3,000 government troops and police have been involved in what has been termed a “constriction campaign.”

According to government sources, as of September 17, 88 people had been killed and 166 wounded. Of the dead, 71 were MNLF combatants, ten government security forces, while seven were civilians. Over 70,000 people have been displaced in the course of the fighting.

The sudden eruption of fighting in Zamboanga is the result of political tensions produced by the drive by Washington to encircle China and assert its hegemony throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration is in the process of shifting the preponderance of its naval and military forces to the region, establishing bases in Australia and seeking to do so elsewhere.

On June 27, Philippine Defense Minister Voltaire Gazmin announced that the Philippine government would be establishing basing arrangements for both the US and Japanese militaries. These bases would be established, he stated, “to roll back China’s expansive claims in the West Philippine Sea [South China Sea].”

Negotiations between Washington and Manila for these basing arrangements have been ongoing since the beginning of the Aquino administration in 2010. Part of the preparations for the re-establishment of US bases in the country was the creation of a peace settlement negotiated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a rival organization that broke away from the MNLF in 1977.

The MNLF was founded in 1969 under the leadership of Nur Misuari, who had been a leader in Kabataang Makabayan, the youth wing of the Maoist Communist

Party of the Philippines (CPP). The MNLF waged an armed struggle, ostensibly for the creation of an independent Muslim-dominated Bangsamoro Republic in the southern Philippines.

The MNLF signed peace accords in Tripoli with the Marcos government brokered by Muammar Gaddafi in 1976. The accords granted the MNLF semi-autonomy within a region that later became known as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and Misuari became an important political power-broker. Internal disputes within the MNLF in the wake of the peace deal led to a split within the organization and resumption of armed struggle by a group that later became the MILF.

The peace accord between the MNLF and the Philippine government broke down during implementation and fighting resumed. A final peace agreement was forged in 1996, under the presidency of former general Fidel Ramos.

Both the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the 1996 Final Peace Agreement were signed under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The MNLF has observer status in the organization and the OIC still recognizes Misuari as the official representative of the Moro peoples in the Philippines. The MNLF claim, established in the Tripoli agreement, asserts that the autonomous region includes the westernmost Philippine island of Palawan.

The proximity of Palawan to the disputed Spratly islands serves as the basis for Manila’s claim in the South China Sea, and has for years been an important staging ground for the annual US-Philippine joint military exercises that are explicitly aimed at China.

The Philippine constitution officially prohibits the establishment of foreign military bases in the country. This prohibition has long been circumvented by means of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which authorized the stay of US military personnel as ‘visitors’ in the country. The mass re-deployment of US forces envisioned under the Obama ‘pivot’ to Asia, however, cannot be

served by the limited arrangements established under the VFA.

Two legal means of establishing military bases in the Philippines exist: an amendment to the constitution, or the creation of an autonomous region within the country, able to conclude basing arrangements with foreign powers, by-passing the constitutional limitations imposed on Manila.

WikiLeaks revealed that Washington had been secretly negotiating with the MILF for the better part of a decade. With the election of Aquino in 2010, secret talks between Manila and the MILF were held in Tokyo under the watchful eye of both the US and Japanese governments. A peace accord framework was established out of these talks, and negotiations were concluded in Kuala Lumpur in October 2012.

The peace accord with the MILF established a framework for the creation of Bangsamoro, an autonomous political entity on Mindanao. The Bangsamoro framework authorizes the representatives of the region—composed entirely of the MILF leadership—to conclude independent economic negotiations with foreign capital. Bangsamoro will not be subject to even the minimal stipulations of Philippine labor law. The MILF leadership stand poised to profit immensely from brokering the labor and natural resources of Mindanao to the highest international bidders.

The Bangsamoro framework explicitly renounces all Moro control over Palawan.

The Bangsamoro peace deal with the MILF supplanted the ARMM controlled by the MNLF and Misuari. An autonomous region brokered by Gaddafi and the OIC had been replaced by one brokered by Washington and Tokyo.

Misuari and the MNLF factions under his control have sought to re-establish political control by undermining the implementation of the Bangsamoro framework through a series of increasingly desperate measures. In February, fighting broke out in the Sulu archipelago, as Misuari attempted to negotiate with the Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization, in a bid to regain political clout.

Less than a month later, Misuari and the MNLF gave their support to the Sultan of Sulu's invasion of Sabah, Malaysia, in bid to undermine the peace deal by creating a conflict between Manila and Kuala Lumpur which had brokered the peace deal with the MILF.

Last month, Misuari abruptly declared the independence of a Bangsamoro Republic in an MNLF controlled area on Sulu Island.

According to an ABS-CBN news report, following Misuari's independence declaration, political analysts

warned Aquino that Misuari should not be ignored. "He has made many declarations in the past, but this is one of the most serious ones," the report quoted political analyst Clarita Carlos, "There is a real need to talk to Misuari, he's still part of the Bangsamoro."

It appears that the Aquino government continued to ignore the MNLF.

The fighting began on September 9. Around 200 unarmed MNLF rebels were shipped from nearby Basilan Island, a known MNLF stronghold, to the outskirts of the Zamboanga City. The rebels reportedly planned to march to city hall and hoist up the MNLF flag as an independence declaration. Given that the city is the headquarters of Philippine armed forces in Mindanao and the location of a key US intelligence base, it is seems unlikely that the MNLF planned anything more than a demonstration.

Philippine military intelligence monitored and allowed the buildup of the MNLF group for three days before suddenly arresting four MNLF rebels for carrying arms. This arrest set off the fighting.

Misuari, when finally contacted three days after the fighting began, denied that the MNLF had planned an attack on the city. Under threat of criminal prosecution from Manila, Misuari disowned his key political ally leading the MNLF rebels in the city and declared the group to be a rogue faction. This declaration by Misuari gave legal sanction to the Philippine government's use of the military force without officially violating its standing peace agreement with the MNLF.

Both Aquino and the MILF sought to draw as much political gain from the conflict as possible. The MILF called for Aquino to declare the 1996 agreement with the MNLF "moot and academic," while Aquino rejected a deal hammered out by a leading political rival, Vice President Jejomar Binay, with the MNLF for a withdrawal and safe passage of the rebels trapped in the city.



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