

Philippine peace deal in Mindanao followed by military assault

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Two days after signing the final annex of a peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on January 25, Philippine President Benigno Aquino's government ordered an all-out military assault on a break-away separatist group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) on the southern island of Mindanao. The Armed Forces of the Philippines reported that they have killed 52 people in the campaign, including 13 children, all alleged to be armed combatants and BIFF members.

The final round of the negotiations, held in Kuala Lumpur, culminated a lengthy process. In 1976, the armed separatist group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), struck a peace deal with the Marcos administration. Brokered in Tripoli, Libya by Muammar Gaddafi, the agreement granted semi-autonomous rule in portions of Mindanao. A portion of the MNLF, discontented with the terms of the deal, broke away and formed what would become the MILF.

The MNLF Tripoli Accord was finally implemented under President Fidel Ramos in 1996, placing MNLF leader Nur Misuari at the head of the newly-formed Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The MILF intensified its armed struggle in an attempt to undermine the ARMM.

The island of Mindanao is a resource rich and grossly underdeveloped region of the Philippines, with large untapped mineral and petroleum reserves, as well as agricultural plantations. The separatist movements represent the interests of sections of the capitalist class in Mindanao seeking a degree of autonomy from Manila and thus a greater share in the profits extracted via the exploitation of local resources and labor.

The rival MNLF and the MILF leaderships are each trying to establish themselves as the political clients of the Mindanao bourgeoisie, through successful

negotiations with Manila. They have mobilized armies drawn largely from the ranks of the dispossessed peasantry, using the rhetoric of regional nationalism in the case of the MNLF, and religious fundamentalism in the case of the MILF.

Nur Misuari and other leaders of the MNLF were former leaders in Kabataang Makabayan, the youth wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines. The MNLF's program was a secular nationalist one, directly inspired by the reactionary Stalinist two-stage theory, which insists the tasks of the revolution are national and democratic, not socialist.

MILF members, under the leadership of Hashim Salamat, received military training and instruction in Islamic fundamentalism during the US-backed covert war by Mujaheddin fighters against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Nur Misuari and the MNLF were unable to provide stable governance for the Mindanao bourgeoisie. In particular, the MNLF failed to suppress the MILF armed insurgency. Kidnappings and armed clashes were a routine part of life.

Foreign corporations, particularly US and Japanese agricultural and mining interests, were eager to exploit the region, but could not securely invest funds without a stable business environment.

WikiLeaks cables revealed that the US Embassy in Manila began secret negotiations with the MILF as early as 2003. A peace deal concluded in 2008 by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo broke down when the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. There is evidence that members of Arroyo's administration may have deliberately sabotaged the deal. A portion of the MILF army command, under the leadership of Ameril Umbra Kato, displeased with the outcome of the negotiations, broke from the MILF and formed the

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

The crucial change since the failure of the 2008 peace deal has been the Obama administration's drive to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China, in its so-called pivot to Asia. Since his election in 2010, Philippine President Aquino has become a leading proxy for US imperialism in the region. As part of Washington's moves to ratchet up pressure on Beijing, it has been seeking control of the strategic maritime routes through the South China and East China Seas.

Washington is looking to secure basing arrangements for US forces in the Philippines, but also to shift the focus of the Philippine military away from armed confrontation in the southern Philippines and toward the South China Sea. Japan, encouraged by Washington, has adopted an aggressive stance against China and engaged in negotiations with Manila for the basing of its own troops in the country.

At the instigation of the US State Department, Aquino and the MILF held secret talks in Tokyo shortly after Aquino's election. These talks led to the opening of peace negotiations in Kuala Lumpur, in which advisors from both Washington and Tokyo played a key role. Over the past year, the final annexes of the peace deal have been hammered out.

The MILF will be given control of an autonomous Bangsamoro region, in which it will receive 75 percent of all tax revenues, 75 percent of mining revenues, and 50 percent of fossil fuel revenues, while the central government will retain the balance. A host of tax-exempt Economic Processing Zones will be opened up to foreign corporations. Japan has already begun investing in the first EPZ. Even before the final peace annex was complete, MILF representatives were secretly in Japan receiving training to establish an administration in Bangsamoro.

The last sticking point was the normalization of the armed MILF rebels, a deal concluded over the past weekend. The normalization document provided for the Philippine National Police, in coordination with the MILF and the Philippine Army, to be responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the autonomous region. The MILF's armed body will be gradually disbanded, under the supervision of a seven-member panel, three of whom are from undisclosed foreign countries. A portion of the MILF fighters will be incorporated into the Philippine army.

To go into effect, the peace deal must now be ratified by the Philippine congress and then by a plebiscite of residents of the proposed Bangsamoro region.

A Philippine military and MILF Adhoc Joint Action Group was created out of the final proceedings. Determined to crush any potential opposition to the peace deal, the joint action group immediately launched a full-scale military assault on the BIFF, carrying out air strikes and mortar shelling, and sending in ground troops. According to government estimates, the BIFF has 250 armed followers, while BIFF's head Kato claims 1,000. Ten thousand residents have been displaced by the fighting so far.

The United States has over 500 Special Forces troops stationed in Mindanao. They have routinely assisted in this type of operation, providing, among other things, drone surveillance of the areas under assault.

Nur Misuari's MNLF will lose all political power which it had gained through the ARMM. For the past year, the MNLF has conducted a series of violent provocations, seeking to undermine the MILF peace deal. There is widespread speculation that Misuari is attempting to form an alliance with Kato to unite the MNLF with the BIFF in opposition to the MILF.

By the government's own admission, one of the camps attacked by the military in the past week belonged not to BIFF, but to the MNLF. The danger of a broader conflict erupting out of this "peace deal" is very real.

At the end of 72 hours of military operations, the head of the Philippine ground forces stated they would not stop their attack, saying: "We will not stop our operation because the MILF itself has requested us to finish the BIFF for good, so they will have no problem with them later on."

The immediate full-scale military assault gives the lie to the claim that the deal between the MILF and Manila is about forging peace in Mindanao. It is about establishing new terms for the joint exploitation of the island and its working inhabitants, by the Mindanao and Manila bourgeoisie and global capitalist interests.



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