

Important Considerations Regarding the War in Mindanao ...

The original article is available at the following address:

<http://www.philippineupdate.com/mindaquest.htm>

Fr. Eliseo R. Mercado, Jr, OMI

President, Notre Dame University

Chair, KUSOG MINDANAW

Assembly Floor Leader, SPCPD Consultative Assembly

GREETINGS OF PEACE!

The common mistake people make when they speak of the present war in Mindanao is to lump together the different Muslim actors into one and put them all together in one "basket." And to many people that "basket" is a "waste basket," showing a deep-seated prejudice that the Muslim people in the South is considered a "basket case." This fact is done either because of malice or sheer ignorance or both.

The first thing we need to do in order to understand the complex issue involved in the present Mindanao War is to distinguish the different Muslim actors. This is **NOT** a popular view, because from the Presidency to the people in the street, there is a natural proclivity to adopt a simplistic view of the complex issue and thus advocate for simplistic solution such as the prevailing "all out military solution" expressed in various slogans like: "final solution," "total war," "degrade the MILF capability," "take over all the MILF camps," etc.

The three previous administrations, at various times, (Marcos in 1976, Aquino in 1987 and Ramos in 1996) have come to realize that only through a painstaking peace process can the Philippine Government realistically address in a more sustainable way the complex issue of the Bangsamoro people. In fact, the Philippine Government's **OFFICIALLY ARTICULATED POLICY** is contained in the Executive Order 125 issued by then President Fidel V. Ramos on August 25th, 1993. This is a direct result of the nationwide consultation on the root causes of unpeace in the country conducted by the National Unification Commission chaired by the former feisty COMELEC Commissioner, Atty. Haydee Yorac. Basically the policy adopted the principle of a peaceful negotiated political settlement with dignity and **NO SURRENDER or SHAME**. The same Executive Order lays down the **SIX PATHS** to Peace that the Philippine Government shall pursue in the unfolding Peace Process.

For the purpose of emphasis, the SIX (6) PATHS to Peace are hereby re-articulated. The **first path** is the continuing effort to effect genuine social, economic and political reforms. This path shall squarely address the root causes of insurgency and the apparent lack of social cohesiveness. The **second path** is the process of consensus building and people empowerment on various issues confronting the nation and our people. This path seeks to respond to the traditional politics of exclusion that continues to divide the country and regions. **The third path** is to pursue a peaceful and negotiated settlement between the government and the various groups and movements that are in rebellion. The **fourth path** is to initiate programs of reconciliation and re-integration of former combatants and their families. It seeks to address the need for healing and reconciliation after years of bloodletting and war. The **fifth path** is the policy of government's continued protection of civilians, especially in times of conflicts. The **sixth path** is the Government's commitment to the building and nurturing a climate of Peace.

There are two (2) major actors that have engaged the Philippine government in the Peace Process in the Southern Philippines. The first group is the **Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)**. The MNLF led the Bangsamoro War in the 70's and remains the **SOLE AND THE LEGITIMATE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE BANGSAMORO PEOPLE** in the eyes of the whole Islamic world. Under its founding and current Chair, Prof. Nur Misuari, the MNLF has become the **PARTNER** of Government on account of the September 02, 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the GRP and the MNLF. The said agreement has paved the way for the creation of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) and the establishment of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) and the Consultative Assembly (CA). The SPCPD and the CA are the two transitional mechanisms that shall promote, enhance and coordinate all Peace and Development initiatives in the fourteen (14) provinces and ten (10) cities that comprise the SZOPAD.

The second group is the **Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)**. It was sometime in 1978 that the first fissure within the Moro Front came to the fore. There were three major factions that surfaced in that same year that eventually led to the break up of the MNLF into three factions that followed the three major ethnic groupings of the Bangsamoro People (Tausug, Maguindanao and Maranao). The **MNLF**, the **MILF** under Ustadz Salamat Hashim and and the **MNLF Reformist** Group under Commander Dimas Pundato were the three groups that had emerged from that internal debates and controversy.

By its chosen name, the MILF puts emphasis on **RELIGION**. It explicitly espouses the establishment of an Islamic Community (ummah) and Islamic rule in areas under its control and/or influence. This has been the beginning

of its articulated goal of "creating a Separate and Independent Islamic State" in the Southern Philippines. How this Islamic State shall take shape is a continuing debate among the Muslims scholars and the MILF constituency. The MILF claims as the "SOLE and LEGITIMATE REPRESENTATIVE" of the Bangsamoro people still in rebellion after the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1996. However, they, too, have entered into a peace process with the GRP immediately following the 1996 Peace Agreement. The GRP and the MILF concluded an initial Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostility on July 18, 1997. The Peace Talks between the GRP and the MILF were progressing well albeit beset by difficulty and problems, particularly on the implementation of the Cease-fire Agreement. But tragically, the Government adopted a military solution in its declaration of a total war policy against the MILF articulated by the President himself during his visit in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte after the brief MILF occupation of the town hall. From the second week of March 2000, the National Defense and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) got into the "flag raising ritual" in all MILF Camps that concluded in the take over of the MILF Main Camp Abubakar with the President himself leading the flag raising and the feasting of roasted pigs and beer for the "victorious" AFP.

The MNLF Reformist Group only lasted for a few years immediately following the MNLF split in the late 70s. The group was co-opted by the government even before the EDSA event in 1986. The Office of the Muslim Affairs (OMA) and the two autonomous regions in the Southern Philippines (RAG IX and RAG XII) absorbed the so-called MNLF "returnees" and the MNLF Reformists following their decision to join the fold of the law. Dimas Pundato was appointed Head of the Office of the Muslim Affairs, while others were appointed either as Members of the Executive Council or the Legislative Assembly of the two Autonomous Regions IX and XII.

The group that has become notorious in the South is the **Abu Sayyaf Group** (ASG) under the joint leadership of Janjalani and Angeles beginning 1992. The height of terrorism by this group reached a new peak during the famous burning of the town center of Ipil, Zamboanga del Sur in 1995. It waned during the rest of the term of Pres. Ramos, especially after the death of Janjalani and Angeles. Its ugly face has resurfaced this year (2000) under the leadership of the young Qaddafi Janjalani in Basilan and the erstwhile MNLF Commander Robot in the Province of Sulu. The kidnapping of school children and Fr. Rhoel Gallardo, CMF in Basilan and the hostage taking of foreign tourists in Sipadan, Sabah, Malaysia have made the Abu Sayyaf an international Terrorist Group. But even before these two internationally covered terrorism, the ASG, by all calculation, has become notorious for kidnapping and other lawless activities in the island provinces of Basilan and Sulu and in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

There has always been a suspicion that the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF are somewhat "connected," especially when the ASG has begun espousing some major aspirations of the MILF. The MILF officially denies any connection to the ASG and the leadership of the MILF, particularly the religious, openly has condemned the lawless and kidnapping activities of the ASG as "**UN-ISLAMIC**." But even with the denial and open condemnation, there are people who still believe that these two groups are somewhat connected. There are **NO** proofs on the ground that would support this suspicion. But the continued use of Islamic slogans by the Abu Sayyaf simply confirms, to many, the suspicion.

The continuing "drama" of the foreign hostages in Sulu by the Abu Sayyaf group notwithstanding the denials and condemnation of various Muslim groups including the MNLF and the MILF will exacerbate both the isolation of the Muslims and the polarization of the Muslim – Christian aspects of the present War in Mindanao. To the "uninformed", the drama of the hostage taking as well as the brutal killing of Fr. Gallardo continue to fuel the historical "**anti-Muslim animus**" in the present Mindanao War.

The very complex issue of the Bangsamoro people is NOW a hostage to three dangerous currents in the Philippine society. **First** is the current of over-simplistic view of the problem and the pursuit of an "instant" solution to the centuries-old problem. The prevailing culture of "instant" coffee makes people look for an easy fix to the problem in the South. What makes this current very dangerous is the perception that this easy fix and instant solution is the MILITARY OPTION to the Bangsamoro issue. The **second** dangerous current is the natural proclivity of many to lump all Muslims together into one basket. This current is further re-enforced and becomes truly "deadly" when Pres. Estrada himself in his various "ambush" interviews was quoted to have said: "Pareho pareho lang sila", "eh hindi naman sila mga Filipino eh." The **third** current is caused by the strong anti-Abu Sayyaf sentiments following the brutal murder of Fr. Gallardo and the continued agonies over the foreign hostages in Sulu. The terrorism and the lawless activities of the Abu Sayyaf are the major obstacles in the understanding, today, of the Bangsamoro issue.

The Mindanao War has further complicated the Peace Process between the GRP and the MILF. The trauma of the present war runs very deep, because of the massive displacement of people and destruction of homes, including the "pulverization" of the MILF camps, particularly Camps Abubakar, Bushrah and Rajah Muda. There is no doubt that the AFP shall continue their massive presence in all the overrun MILF Camps. Their (AFP) presence in those camps guarantees continued "armed skirmishes" between the AFP and the MILF in and around those camps. In fact, we do not know yet how the MILF declared **JIHAD** shall take shape as an "all out MILF Offensive" against the Philippine

Government and the AFP. Definitely, the war has NOT concluded in the take over of the MILF Main Camp Abubakar.

Then there is the problem of the displaced. There is a common understanding that the displaced are MILF partisans. The numbers of the displaced range from 600,000 (NGO estimate) to 300,000 (Government's estimate). They are housed in school buildings and tent "cities" in the Provinces of Cotabato, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Sur. The agonies and sufferings of the displaced are beyond any description, especially in terms of health and sanitation needs. While the government is reported to spend twenty-three millions pesos a day in the conduct of the Mindanao War, it spends a measly million pesos a week for the needs of the evacuees. In contrast, Tabang Mindanaw, an NGO, spends two millions a week for the evacuees. To date, there are 187 deaths recorded in the various evacuation centers caused by various illnesses due to the lack of adequate basic facilities. The lot of the evacuees is getting worse as government assistance begin to dwindle due to lack of funds.

The AFP has become a Force of Occupation. This fact, in a way, has made the AFP's claim of liberating the areas and highways **HOLLOW**. The displaced will **NOT** return to their villages and homes while the AFP continues to occupy those villages. The AFP has become a **FORCE of OCCUPATION** for these people. This is a dangerous development, when the true war to win is the NOT over areas and territories but hearts and minds of the people that constitute the Bangsamoro people. The only way for Government to avoid this natural pitfall is to transform the role of the AFP in these occupied territories. Can the AFP become "builders" and development workers. This would mean a new orientation for the military in order for them to assume new role in the model of what Col. Victor Corpuz did in Sultan sa Barongis, Maguindanao and in Panay. If the AFP continues to be perceived as "occupationary forces," the whole military operations would be in vain and shall only fuel the hatred and animosity of the Muslim population against the Government and the AFP.

The present environment **DOES NOT** warrant the continuance of the FORMAL Peace Talks between the GRP and the MILF. There are so many conditions and demands being made for the Formal peace Talks to move forward. Moreover, the Formal Peace Talks is one of the casualties of the on going War in Mindanao. There is, however, the need of INFORMAL PEACE TALKS between the GRP and the MILF in order to continue the discussion over the issues already raised between the GRP and the MILF Panels. The **INFORMAL PEACE TALKS** will be more productive and can prepare the ground through confidence building measures for the eventual resumption of the Peace Talks. There is a need for a lot of "confidence building measures,"

because the present war has shot down all trust and confidence built through the years.

The total breakdown of trust and confidence necessitates the NEED for a new TEAM or PANEL both for the GRP and the MILF. For the GRP Panel, the Mindanao Constituency advocates for a **Mindanawan** and preferably from an LGU with easy access to the Presidency to CHAIR the GRP Panel. The experience of war will also dictate the need for a truly **CIVILIAN** leadership in the Peace Panel. In our earlier paper, the names of Dungcoy Emano, Rudy Duterte or even Paul Dominguez and Jess Dureza were mentioned as possible "CHAIR" of the GRP Peace Panel.

The ugly face of the MILF - declared JIHAD is beginning to unfold. The alleged attacks against civilian communities and the bombing of civilian targets though officially denied by the MILF are believed to be the work of the MILF. The civilian casualties point to the brutal and ugly visage of an all out war between the GRP and the MILF. Several sectors in Mindanao, particularly the religious continue to hold the GRP and the MILF to limit their fights between and among combatants. At no time, should the civilians and their communities be targets of military actions, either offensive or defensive.

The cost of war and the seeming "disconnectedness" and "remoteness" of the so-called Mindanao Coordinating Council (MCC) will render any attempt of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction futile. The MCC is up in the air and will continue to float so long as the participation of the Mindanawans, particularly the civil society remain **marginal**. The Chairmanship and Vice Chairmanship of the MCC by the President himself and his Executive Secretary respectively guarantee that it shall float for a very obvious reason. The two Offices as they are already deluged by myriad of issues and problems confronting the country to have the needed time and focus in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-ravaged Mindanao. At its first meeting, the MCC has realized of the marginal presence and participation of Mindanawans in the said Council.

It is very tragic that the MCC is designed by the people from all over except Mindanao and it is being offered as yet another body to coordinate development and rehabilitation program apart from the 1996 Peace Agreement and the SPCPD and CA. It is not only violative the Peace Agreement but it also disregards completely the SPCPD and the CA. The creation of the MCC has further exacerbated the confusion in Mindanao between and among NEW "Bodies" and the RDC's with NO CLEAR VISION AND FOCUS (MEDCO, PARECO, SPCPD, CA, SPDA, etc.).

What looks very insulting to intelligence is the new demand of the Erap Administration for a SPECIAL POWER (Emergency Power) to "accelerate" the MCC's work of reconstruction. What is needed is NOT SPECIAL POWER but leadership and clarity of vision in pursuing Peace and Development in Mindanao. No amount of power – special or emergency – can take the place of effective and visionary leadership in Mindanao. The previous Ramos administration through a series of consultations and Summit meetings had made Mindanao the front door of the country and a new gateway of opportunity vis-à-vis the BIMP-EAGA. Within the two years of the Erap Administration, Mindanao has found itself not only at war again but once again in the backwater of development. The Presidency in the hand of President Estrada is a disaster to Mindanao. The Presidency plus Emergency Power in the hand of President Estrada will be a **NIGHTMARE**.

In the continuing bleak reality of the Mindanao war, the peace advocates and people of goodwill hope that sanity, in the end, shall prevail over the prevailing madness in Mindanao. There is no doubt that the two parties will eventually resume the genuine search for a peaceful negotiated settlement. It may be more difficult this time, but there is no alternative to a peaceful and principled negotiated settlement with no surrender and shame. Whether this will take place in the remaining years of Pres. Estrada is totally another issue. But in the end, **we continue to hope and believe in miracles**.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.