



**PHILIPPINE INSTITUTE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE  
AND TERRORISM RESEARCH**

No. 5, Road 7, West Crame,  
San Juan, Metro Manila, Philippines  
Tel: +632 6665763, Fax: +632 4335248, Website: www.pipvtr.com

## **GRP-MILF PEACE TALKS IN QUESTION**

**By Eugene Martin**



In the Philippines, the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo recently reached an agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to end decades of conflict by granting self-determination and self-governance to the Moro minority in Moro dominated parts of the southern island of Mindanao. Non-Moro opponents of the concessions challenged the agreement in the Supreme Court. Violence erupted, as some MILF units rampaged and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) struck back. Negotiations to settle the ethnic conflict have ceased.

From 2003 to 2007, **Eugene Martin** was executive director of USIP's **Philippine Facilitation Project**, which aimed to further the peace process between the government and the MILF. A retired senior Foreign Service officer, Martin served twice in the Philippines, as deputy chief of mission in 1996–99 and as a political military officer in 1987–90. He now is the director of the Washington Office of Johns Hopkins University's Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies.

Martin's work on the Philippine reconciliation project was summarized in a USIP **Special Report** (February 2008) and highlighted in a recent *National Journal* **article** about USIP.

### **Who are the parties in the conflict? How did it begin?**

Filipino Muslim children shout slogans calling for peace in southern Mindanao provinces as they hold a prayer rally outside a mosque in suburban Taguig, south of Manila on Friday Aug. 29, 2008. Aid workers stepped up food assistance to hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians in the southern Philippines as fighting eased after troops overran 18 Muslim rebel camps in a 10-day offensive. (AP Photo)

Muslim missionaries and traders brought Islam to the islands of Southeast Asia in the fourteenth century and converted indigenous tribes. When the Spanish

colonized the Philippines, they were unable to conquer and convert the Islamized sultanates in the southern islands. After the Spanish American War of 1898, the U.S. purchased the Philippines, including the Moro sultanates, from the Spanish. The Moros resisted U.S. colonial authority and were subdued by the U.S. Army. Some Moro historians assert that they were incorporated into the Philippine nation by U.S. colonial authorities.

When the U.S. granted the Philippine Islands autonomy under a commonwealth in 1935 and full independence in 1946, the Moros protested strongly against inclusion but were disregarded. They attempted unsuccessfully to preserve their ancestral lands and way of life through political and democratic means in the face of massive migration by non-Moros from northern islands. As the settlers dominated the land and political power, the Moros—who now constitute about five percent of the region’s population—rebelled against the central government in an attempt to reassert their historical independence.

### **Who are the “Moros”?**

The Spanish called Islamized tribes they encountered in the Philippine islands “Moros” —their name for the Muslims of North Africa, who had ruled Peninsular Spain in previous centuries. Initially a pejorative term, it began to be used as a common identifier for diverse Islamized ethno-linguistic groups in the southern Philippines. In recent years, the term “Bangsamoro” (meaning Moro nation) has gained currency among both the Bangsamoro themselves and the broader Filipino population.

### **Describe the different parties in the Philippines' insurgent movements—MILF, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Jemaah Islamiyah, etc.? What are their stances?**

There are important distinctions among the insurgent movements, the Moro political factions and the terrorist organizations that claim, at times, to fight for a political or even a putatively religious cause.

The MILF and MNLF historically have been armed insurgent movements that have sought to assert and to defend their claims to ancestral homelands from settlers who have altered the demographic balance and have come to control political and economic power, marginalizing the impoverished Moros. The MNLF, however, has long since changed into a legitimate political party and authority. The MNLF was founded in the late 1960s by Nur Misuari, a leftist student radical at Manila’s University of the Philippines. The impetus for the founding of the MNLF included both the Marcos government’s imposition of martial law (1972-81) and attacks on Muslim communities by vigilante groups of settlers. Its ideology, based upon leftist national liberation models, advocated independence for Moro areas. The MNLF concluded a peace agreement with the

government of President Ramos in 1996 that allowed the MNLF to govern the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

MNLF Vice Chairman Salamat Hashiim splintered from the MNLF in the early 1980s to found the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) based on Islamic religious principles, as distinct from the MNLF's more traditional secular leftist-nationalist ideology. The MILF continued its rebellion after the MNLF-government of the Philippines (GRP) peace agreement, based on autonomy within Philippines national sovereignty, took effect. Hashiim continued to advocate outright independence.

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is a small group of "kidnap-for-ransom" criminals who adopted extremist Islamic trappings to gain publicity. The ASG is believed to have material and ideological support from al-Qaeda elements and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members in Indonesia. The JI is an Indonesian extremist organization that has employed terror tactics. Its members previously trained in MILF training camps in Mindanao.

The U.S. designated the ASG a terrorist organization in 2002 after it kidnapped twenty people, including three American citizens. One American was executed and another, missionary Martin Burnham, died during a Philippine military rescue attempt.

Despite decimation by the Armed Forces of the Philippines, with training and intelligence support from U.S. forces, ASG continues to operate in remote areas of the islands of Sulu and Basilan.

Another major insurgent group in the Philippines is the National Democratic Front (NDF) of the Philippine Communist Party. The NDF has violently opposed the government since the end of World War II. The NDF and MILF have an understanding to operate in different areas. They are believed to cooperate occasionally despite fundamentally conflicting ideologies and objectives.

### **Why have these groups found haven in the southern Philippines?**

Finding themselves unable to advance their objectives by political means, many Moros, including the MNLF, MILF, and terrorist offshoots such as the ASG, accepted whatever foreign assistance they could find. After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan ended, many of the Moro mujahidin fighters who had fought in that country returned home and offered their services to oppose Philippine military operations in Mindanao. These fighters established training camps in MNLF and MILF controlled areas. As early support from countries such as Malaysia and Libya ended, the MILF agreed to train JI and al-Qaeda fighters in return for financial support and arms. The camps also offered JI and other

terrorist elements a sanctuary in which to rest and hide. Many of the fighters married and settled in Moro areas, blending into the population.

### **What were the key components of the peace agreement between the Macapagal Arroyo government and the MILF?**

USIP had no direct access to the draft agreement. From Filipino media reports, however, it appears that the latest Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) focused on “ancestral domain.” It is the last of three components of a comprehensive agreement to end the long conflict. The other two—security and economic development—were concluded several years ago. The MOA gives the MILF the right of self-governance over a designated area of the island of Mindanao. This includes establishing what is termed the “Bangsamoro Juridical Entity” (BJE) that would have the authority to structure the area’s governing institutions, pass local laws, have control over natural and marine resources and establish trade and cultural relations with foreign nations and entities. The geographical extent of the BJE reportedly would include the existing Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and additional villages in neighboring provinces.

### **Why is the Philippine Supreme Court considering halting a peace agreement with the government that would include an expanded Muslim autonomous zone?**

Before the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) could be signed in early August, MOA opponents persuaded the Supreme Court to issue a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) barring the government from signing the agreement until the court had the opportunity to hear arguments for and against the agreement. The suit against the MOA argued that it was unconstitutional to grant a specific group (the Moros or the MILF) separate status from other Filipinos or to allow non-Moro citizens to be forced to live under the BJE without their consent. The plaintiffs argued that any such devolution of governance authority had to be legislated by the Congress within the parameters of the constitution.

### **What does this mean for Filipino politics? Who are the Christian groups that oppose the accord and petitioned the Supreme Court?**

The Court’s TRO on the MOA and the government’s subsequent decision to withdraw the MOA, dissolve the peace panel and refuse to negotiate with armed groups (such as the MILF) appear to leave few alternatives to resolve the conflict through lawful, peaceful, political means. Each side—the Christian majority and the Muslim minority—fears that the other now is threatening their core interests and rights, not least their respective religious identities, but also their property interests.

The plaintiffs were mainly Christian politicians in Mindanao and their supporters or allies in Congress. Many of them had long opposed any compromise with the Moros, whether armed groups or political movements. Most of the plaintiffs were descendents of early Christian settlers in Mindanao.

### **What happens now? Can a peace agreement be salvaged?**

In the short term, there appears to be little chance that the two principal parties can or will restart the peace process, at least during the last year and a half of the Arroyo administration. The GRP has announced it will not resume negotiations with armed groups, focusing instead on working with Moro communities and civil society to bring peace to Mindanao. The Moro perspective is that this attempt to ignore and marginalize the MILF will result in the traditional power relationship with the GRP in a dominant position.

Since the GRP has not been able to resolve the conflict over the past 40 years through either political or military means, renewed violence appears as likely as ever. The Moros are well aware of the futility of negotiation under current circumstances. Some Moros may decide that violence, including terror tactics in Manila and other urban areas outside Muslim Mindanao are the only way to get the attention of the Filipino majority. Such desperate measures would only further alienate the fragile constituencies on both sides for any peace deal.

A return to military operations and violence might even kindle more active cooperation between the diverse insurgent groups and terrorist elements. The MNLF, which has been dissatisfied with the government's adherence to its commitments under the 1996 agreement, could join the MILF in fighting the AFP. Both Moro organizations could increase cooperation with the NDF in opposing government actions. Although the MILF has distanced itself from the ASG, if hard pressed by the AFP, it could increase cooperation.

It is unlikely the Arroyo administration has the capability or political support to revive the discarded MOA even if it desired. The lack of public information and education on the causes of the conflict, the issues under negotiation and options for settlement results in opponents dominating and shaping the debate.

It will be difficult for the Arroyo administration to resume talks for the remainder of her term (through the presidential elections in May 2010) or for presidential candidates to support resumption. It will likely be three to five years before the political climate will permit new talks, if then. In the interim, more violence, including in Manila, is a possibility.

### **Did the prospective MOA connote a step to Moro independence and the breakup of the Philippines?**

By agreeing to negotiate with the GRP, the MILF publicly relinquished their goal of independence in return for genuine self-determination and the right to govern themselves within the Philippine nation state. The last-minute rejection of the MOA and apparent consequent end of the negotiations regarding ancestral domain now raises the danger of a return to violent conflict.

### **What are the implications for regional politics?**

If the conflict in Mindanao returns to violence, terrorist groups will likely exploit the situation to infiltrate and destabilize the Philippines. Although Moro interests and objectives are not the same as terrorist groups such as ASG, al-Qaeda or JI, the MILF may decide at least to tolerate their presence and activities. This would allow the extremists to pose as advocates for the rights of the Bangsamoro, even as they perpetrate violent acts throughout the Philippines that undermine the Moros' claims for their ancestral rights.

### **What are the implications for U.S. policy? Will the U.S. want to re-open a base in the country?**

Violence and instability in the Philippines will hurt the political, economic and strategic interests of everyone—the Moros, the broader Filipino nation, and the region. Another spate of violence would harm the U.S. stake in the stability and prosperity of the Philippines and its neighbors. Conceivably, the U.S. might be persuaded by the GRP or AFP to treat the MILF as terrorists and participate in or at least support counterinsurgency operations against them. Alternatively, the U.S. theoretically could use try to use political or economic leverage to press the government to resume peace talks, notwithstanding the GRP's domestic political equities. Neither outcome is likely to accomplish the intended objectives. Therefore the U.S. is unlikely to pursue either course under current circumstances.

In particular, since the U.S. closed its bases in the Philippines at the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, it has not sought to re-establish a permanent military presence in any part of that country. Deployments of limited numbers of U.S. forces to the Philippines since 2002 have been on a strictly temporary basis, with the purpose of training and equipping the AFP.

Nonetheless, various Filipino political factions, including some Moros, have presumed that the U.S. remains interested in establishing military bases in the Philippines, and some Moros have suggested that U.S. help in resolving the conflict could set the stage for the establishment of a U.S. military base there. Regardless of whether various Filipinos find such a prospect abhorrent or desirable, it is far-fetched.

## **What was USIP's role in the facilitation process?**

Between 2003 and 2007, the Institute was engaged in facilitating the peace process between the GRP and MILF. USIP became involved at the request of the U.S. State Department and with Congressional funding after both the GRP and the MILF requested U.S. assistance to end the long conflict between the government and the Islamized Moro minority.

USIP worked to assist both parties to address the underlying causes of the conflict—loss of traditional lands as well as economic and political marginalization of the Moros caused by a century of migration by non-Moro peoples from northern islands.

As there is little public understanding among the non-Moro Filipino population of the conflict's causes or sympathy for Moro grievances, USIP sponsored programs to highlight these issues. Programs included lectures and discussions in universities, radio dramas, distribution to schools of a video on the history of the Moros and origins of the conflict, media seminars, teacher training workshops, dialogues with religious leaders and conflict management training for students, military officers and civil society leaders. Practitioners and academic experts from countries that had gone through similar conflicts were introduced to GRP and MILF representatives to share experiences and convey lessons learned. A series of workshops were held to bridge intra-Moro rivalries and tensions that complicate GRP efforts to negotiate an agreement satisfactory to all Moros.

After eleven years of talks, the two sides reached an agreement on the ancestral domain issue.

In the subsequent public discussion of the MOA, some Filipinos accused USIP of secretly aiding—if not dictating—the terms of the agreement. Public focus has been on USIP's February 2008 **Special Report**, written at the close of the Institute's project. In fact, USIP did not participate in the talks between the GRP and MILF, which were hosted and staffed by the Malaysian government. While USIP representatives met unofficially with negotiators on both sides and offered technical advice based upon commonly accepted conflict resolution experiences, the formulation of the MOA was determined only by the GRP and MILF panelists.

While USIP had Congressional funding for its Philippine project and advised the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Manila of its activities, Institute personnel operated apart from U.S. government officials in the Philippines. The Institute's independent status allowed it to explore alternative means of resolving the conflict while still respecting official policies and relationships with the Philippine government.

## **How can USIP help in this effort down the road?**

Complying with the wishes of both the GRP and MILF, recognizing the effective mediator role played by the government of Malaysia, and lacking fresh U.S. government funding since 2007, USIP continues merely to follow the conflict at a respectful distance. Nonetheless, the Institute remains ready to contribute its expertise in conflict management and resolution, drawn from numerous case studies worldwide.

USIP is an independent, non-partisan institution dedicated to the management, mitigation and resolution of conflicts around the world. The Institute does not purport to speak for U.S. government policies or analyses, but we do share the view that resolution of this longstanding conflict would greatly advance the interests of the Moros and all Filipinos, neighboring states and the U.S.

Source: USIP at [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)