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**Prospects for Peace in Mindanao: The Withdrawal of Malaysia from the  
International Monitoring Team**

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*Since 2004, the Malaysian Government has led an International Monitoring Team (IMT) that includes personnel from Brunei, Libya, Japan and Canada to monitor the truce between the Philippine Armed Forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It was also Malaysia which brokered the peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF. The peace talks are at an impasse since December 2007 when rebel negotiators disputed proposals by the GRP that included the extent of territory that would fall under Muslim control. Recently, Malaysian officials announced that that it would pull out from the IMT unless the peace talks show concrete progress.*

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**Peace Talks Impasse**

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has over 10,000 fighters making it the largest secessionist group battling with the Philippine government. The group has been waging a rebellion in Mindanao since 1978 and entered peace talks with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) in 2001. A ceasefire has been in place since 2003 but encounters between Philippine troops and MILF rebels are not unheard of.

In 2004, peacekeeping forces from Malaysia were stationed in the southern Philippines as part of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) tasked with monitoring violations of a ceasefire agreement between government forces and the MILF. The Malaysian-led IMT was supported by military officers from Brunei and Libya and has since expanded to include members from Canada and Japan. The team was credited for preventing tensions from escalating into full-blown confrontations and it was observed that since the IMT's deployment, violence between government and rebel forces has significantly decreased.

However, the success of the IMT with curbing tensions has not been complimented with successful peace talk negotiations. In November 2007- after seven long years of negotiations- a deal was struck between the GRP and the MILF on the creation of Muslim homeland in Mindanao. This development led many to believe that that a final peace accord is next. But in December 2007, the peace talks bogged down after both

sides had difficulty in resolving the issue of ancestral domain and economic control over them. The Philippine Government has initially agreed on the areas to be covered but has subsequently raised constitutional issues which led to the suspension of the talks.

In March 2008, MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim said that the group was not optimistic it would sign a final peace accord with the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and that the stalling of the GRP on the peace talks could spark fresh hostilities in Mindanao. The recent announcement of the Malaysian government that it will not send any more monitoring teams in Mindanao once its mandate ends in August this year is attributed to the lack of progress in the peace talks.

### **Malaysia's important role**

In 2000, the MILF was the target of an "all-out war" imposed by then President Joseph Estrada which resulted in the capture of 46 MILF camps and led to Hashim Salamat's declaration of jihad against the Philippine government. When Gloria Macapagal Arroyo became president through a popular uprising in 2001, the peace process was laid out as part of her administration's agenda. President Arroyo declared a unilateral ceasefire and initiated exploratory talks with the MILF. It was the Malaysian government who took an active role as a third-party facilitator in the exploratory talks in Kuala Lumpur and spearheaded peace initiatives in Mindanao through the International Monitoring Team.

In its role as a facilitator, Malaysia should be credited for getting both the Philippine Government and the MILF to make concessions for the peace talks. The GRP repositioned its troops away from MILF strongholds and withdrew arrest warrants against MILF leaders for alleged involvement in bombings in Mindanao. For its part, the MILF provided information to neutralize suspected terrorists and disproved allegations that they have links with terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Jemaah Islamiyah.

Both the GRP and the MILF have credited the Malaysian-led IMT for the improvement of the peace situation in Mindanao for the past several years. But if the Malaysian government makes good on its announcement that it would withdraw its peacekeepers in the IMT, many fears that the five year ceasefire agreement would be at stake.

### **Whose fault is it?**

The Philippine Government admitted that the issue of ancestral domain is still the biggest hindrance to the peace negotiations but that there are efforts to resolve the issue. Under the government's proposal, the present Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) comprised of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan will be given to the MILF. They would also be given a judicial personality to explore and exploit the wealth within the defined territories to which the wealth sharing is 75 percent to the Bangsamoro and 25 percent to the national government. The impasse in the peace talks allegedly stemmed from the MILF's reaction to the GRP's insistence that the Philippine Constitution shall serve as its term of reference and guide in the peace negotiations.

For its part, the MILF accused the Philippine Government of stalling the peace process. They claimed that in November last year, documents and agreements on ancestral domain have already been signed but the government changed its position at the last minute for further “consultations”. In a report in its website [www.luwaran.com](http://www.luwaran.com), the MILF said that they are no longer hopeful of any support from the Philippine Government which they still “technically” consider their enemy since the Moro problem is still unresolved. The MILF also said that it is seriously considering the launch of its Bangsamoro Leadership and Management Institute (BLMI), even without the support of the Philippine Government which has promised to give financial support to the said project. The BLMI was conceptualized during the 10<sup>th</sup> exploratory talks in Guoman, Port Dickson, Selangor on 6-7 February 2008.

Both panels had some agreements on consensus points on the ancestral domain issue and have agreed to forge an “overall framework for the forthcoming formal talks, an inventory of crucial issues to be tackled, the general procedures and parameters and the indicative timeline for the signing of a comprehensive agreement”. But to date, no such initiatives were reported to have taken place.

Malaysian officials have warned as early as 2007 that the IMT team could be pulled out unless there was concrete progress in the stalled peace talks. They stressed that it needs the cooperation from both the GRP and MILF panels to uphold the peace process. The lack of effort from both panels has forced it to announce that it will end its IMT mission in Mindanao this August. In a related development, an unidentified official from Brunei’s Ministry of Defense was quoted by the Borneo Bulletin Newspaper saying that “Brunei will probably pull out its men from Mindanao if Malaysia does”. Malaysia and Brunei contribute most of the nearly 60 troops, police and other forces of the IMT and their impending withdrawal further raised the possibility that the IMT will be disbanded.

### **What next?**

Malaysia’s planned pull-out from the IMT team is seen to have deadly repercussions for Mindanao as it would prompt the MILF to push forward with its agenda as a revolutionary organization and strengthen its forces. The ceasefire between the Philippine Government and MILF would be deemed inutile and while the MILF has claimed that it will honor the ceasefire, it also said that they are ready to thwart any military offensive against them. The relatively stable and peaceful situation in Mindanao would be affected but both the Philippine Government and the MILF have said that peace negotiators would monitor the situation once the mandate of the IMT ends.

The Philippine Government has reiterated that it remains committed to the peace talks and gave assurances that it would resume. The GRP is prepared to push through with the peace talks with the MILF even if Malaysia in the future decides to pull out or reduce its personnel in the International Monitoring Team. They are also prepared to ask for an extension on the stay of the members of the IMT in Mindanao in case their term ends before a final peace agreement is signed with the MILF.

## Analysis

The Philippine Government and the MILF has maintained that they have not received any official confirmation from the Malaysian government on its withdrawal from the IMT Team. But if and when that happens, there is a high possibility that other countries such as the United States would actively participate in the peace process. The US has build up a favorable reputation in Mindanao through its economic and development projects in the region but whether or not they are welcome to actively participate in the peace process is subject to further scrutiny by both the GRP and MILF peace panels. The US Ambassador in the Philippines Kristie Kenney recently met with MILF Chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim and other high-ranking MILF leaders in Mindanao, the first time that an American official of an ambassadorial level had talks with MILF leaders. In that meeting, the US government reiterated its support and continuing assistance to the peace process between the GRP and the MILF.

It could not be stressed enough just how helpful the IMT is in maintaining the ceasefire agreement between the Philippine Government and the MILF. But the Armed Forces of the Philippines has downplayed the possible impact of the pull-out of Malaysian peacekeepers on the ceasefire as the general consensus is that the people of Mindanao want peace and an end to violence. This actually has some basis as there is now a growing realization that fighting it out in the battlefield simply does not work and is in fact costly for both the GRP and the MILF.

Upholding the ceasefire agreement is also in the best interest of neighboring countries that have common borders with the Philippines like Malaysia and Indonesia. These countries have a stake in the peace efforts in Mindanao because any developments in the security front could also affect them. The planned withdrawal of Malaysia from the IMT could very well be the wake-up call the Philippine Government and the MILF peace panels need to rejuvenate their efforts in upholding the peace talks.

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