

Peace Talks Resume as Cease-Fire Comes Under Strain in the Philippines

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By: Zachary Abuza

Monday, September 4 saw the resumption of formal peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The government had announced a major breakthrough in the talks with the MILF in April 2005 and in her July 2006 state of the nation address, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo asserted that the talks were "80 percent completed" (The Sun-Star, August 8). Yet talks stalled in 2006 over the thorny issue of "ancestral domain," and the MILF made clear that there would be no peace agreement signed by the end of the year as the government had announced (The Sun-Star, August 8).

As part of the negotiations, the MILF formally renounced their bid for an independent Islamic state. In return for this concession, they were promised "enhanced" and "meaningful" autonomy, an apparent dig at the failed 1996 GRP-MNLF agreement, which established the toothless Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The enhanced autonomy included the right to establish Sharia courts and other safeguards to protect the cultural identity of the Moros. It also promised greater fiscal control, as well as control over subterranean resources including oil and natural gas (luwaran.com, February 12).

Although there was an agreement in principle regarding "ancestral domain," the talks are hung up on the exact region that will fall under the new autonomous zone (luwaran.com, June 27). It will certainly be larger than the five provinces currently under the ARMM (Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao), but the exact boundaries are still being negotiated and the two sides are far apart (The Sun-Star, August 8). The MILF contends that any community where Muslims are the majority should be incorporated. These include more than 1,000 villages in Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and Davao Oriental provinces. The government has identified some 613 villages with a Muslim majority (Associated Press, September 3). Another point of disagreement is that National Security Advisor Bert Gonzales and hardliners in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have demanded that the MILF completely disarm, a non-starter with the MILF leadership, who consider it tantamount to capitulation (The Manila Standard, August 21).

The stalled peace process has led to a troubling number of cease-fire violations in the past few months. There were clashes in Sulu in February, where the AFP, with U.S. support, has been engaged in fierce fighting against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The AFP claims that the MILF have given Abu Sayyaf militants sanctuary, although the MILF denies this allegation (luwaran.com, February 21). Fighting erupted in June causing some 5,000 refugees, but the cause had more to do with local Muslim politics. Fighting erupted again in late July and early August, again because of conflicts instigated by right-wing paramilitaries (ABS-CBN News, August 11). On August 10, the two sides exchanged mortar fire, and the MILF killed two policemen when they were searching for two members of Jemaah Islamiya. One member of the MILF and two suspected members were arrested on August 28 while trying to board a SuperFerry from Poloc, Maguindanao with IEDs. The MILF asserts that the men were framed (The Manila Standard, August 30). It is clear that the cease-fire is coming under increasing strain.

Yet the heaviest fighting has been waged on the island of Jolo, where the AFP has been fighting Abu Sayyaf militants since the start of August. The AFP has claimed that more than 40 militants have been killed, including several in leadership positions: Otong Halipa Linungan ("Commander Putol"), Albader Parad, Ismin Sahiron and Suaiban Asad. Fighting intensified on September 3-4 in Patikul town when clashes left six marines dead and 19 wounded; the government claims that 30 ASG members were killed, although there is no confirmation to substantiate this (Associated Press, September 5; Reuters, September 4). More reliable sources claim the death of 10 ASG and the capture of eight more, while some nine AFP have been killed since August. The AFP asserts that Khadaffy Janjalani and Isnilon Hapilon are commanding between 200 and 400 troops in the mountainous island of Jolo, which is significantly more men than previously thought the two commanded (Terrorism Focus, August 15). There is a concern, too, that members of the MNLF will become embroiled in the widening conflict, although the MNLF as an organization has denied any involvement. There are currently some 5,000 AFP forces deployed in Jolo who are trained and assisted by a small number of U.S. military advisers.

Philippine security officials are bracing for a new wave of terrorist attacks in Zamboanga, Manila and other cities in retaliation for the current offensive. In August, AFP forces overran a small ASG stronghold where they found a small explosives cache that they believed was being readied for a new round of bombings. In addition, AFP leaders believe that the Abu Sayyaf is protecting two senior JI members, Joko Pitono (Dulmatin) and Umar Patek (Terrorism Focus, July 5).

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The Jamestown Foundation
1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320, Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202.483.8888 | Fax: 202.483.8337 | pubs@jamestown.org
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