



**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE  
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## **ICPVTR Brief**

# **Current Status of the Mindanao Peace Talks**

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## **Current Status of the Mindanao Peace Talks**

Peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have remained stalled since the 4 August 2008 Supreme Court suspension of the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). Prospects for the resumption of peace talks between the two sides further deteriorated when MILF commanders in Central Mindanao attacked villages in Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato and Sarangani on 18 August, killing 49 civilians and wounding 53 others. But on 14 October 2008, voting 8-7 against the MOA-AD, the high court ruled that the homeland deal to grant expanded autonomy to the Muslims patently violated the Constitution.

As a result, the security situation in Maguindanao, Shariff Kabunsuan and North Cotabato remains volatile and the military is bracing for more violence in conflict areas. In Malacañang, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo expressed respect for the high court's ruling but urged local government leaders to help prevent violence that might arise.

The likelihood of an increase in attacks was reinforced as one of the targets of the Philippine military's pursuit operations in Central Mindanao, Umbra Kato of the MILF's 105<sup>th</sup> base command, surfaced on 1 October. Kato, in a video appearance, blamed the government and the military for the miseries of the Bangsamoro people.

On 19 September, in an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera, MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim also warned of an escalation of conflict in Mindanao if the MILF is forced to defend itself against an intensified government "reprisal operation." Murad also called upon the international community to intercede to bring the peace process back on track.

Murad's call came after the European Union appealed to the Philippine government and the MILF to resume peace talks, expressing deep concern with the growing number of civilians killed and displaced. Other groups have likewise called for a "ceasefire" in Mindanao and the resumption of peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF. Although Malaysia expressed disappointment over the collapse of the peace deal, it maintains that the two sides must return to the negotiating table for violence to subside. Malaysia chairs the international team that monitors the peace talks. Team members include Libya, Brunei and Japan. Furthermore, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) has called on the Philippine government to end its military operations in Mindanao and resume peace talks with the MILF to prevent further loss of life and property. OIC Secretary General Elmeddin Ihsanoghu stressed that both parties should work out a swift settlement to the current crisis that has been threatening to thwart the peace process.

As of 11 October 2008, the death toll from the fighting between government and MILF forces in Mindanao has risen to 102 both civilians and combatants. The number of individuals displaced exceeded 600,000. Raids by the rebels and counter-attacks by the military has so far affected 368 villages, 77 municipalities, five cities, and nine provinces in Northern and Central Mindanao and the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

On 9 October 2008, the National Security Council (NSC) of the Cabinet discussed calls for the resumption of peace negotiations. However, after the meeting, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said the Philippine government remains firm on the surrender of erring MILF Commanders Ameril Umbra Kato, Abdurahman Macaapar, and Aleem Pangalian by the MILF leadership as pre-condition for the resumption of peace negotiations. Ermita also noted President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's new peace policy, which now centers on dialogue with affected communities instead of circuitous negotiations with rebel groups.

Significantly, the discussion on the various proposals for the resumption of peace negotiations as well as the government's reiteration of its new peace policy coincided with a closed-door meeting between the Senate's finance sub-committee and the military and defense officials. The Department of National Defense was reported to have pressed for a Php56.5B (about \$1.26B) 2009 budget, a marked increase from this year's budget of Php51B (about \$1.13B). The proposed increase in budget is intended for the implementation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) Modernization Program. This will enable the AFP to carry out the much needed upgrading of military equipment and facilities, as well as training capabilities for effectively defeating insurgency by 2010.

Meantime, the Australian government pledged half of its A\$110M 2008-2009 Philippines development aid to Mindanao. It also expressed optimism over the improvement of the security situation in southern Philippines during the next five years. The Australian government also said that the Philippines' and the region's development plays a vital role in preventing acts of terrorism by addressing their root causes--poverty and ignorance. Increased support will be provided to improve access to and quality of education for children in disadvantaged and conflict affected areas. The aid will also support upgrading and maintenance of critical road infrastructure at the provincial level. The aid will likewise assist peace building programs focused at the community level, provision of economic opportunities through small scale infrastructure development and microfinance, as well as delivery of health services.

Earlier, the United States and the European Union also pledged millions of dollars for development aid in Mindanao. The promise of humanitarian assistance comes at a time when the Philippine military has been gaining successes in its pursuit against the rebels.

While there is consensus among all parties for peace negotiations to resume, the offensives in Mindanao continue. Both the Philippine Government and the MILF have developed a sound foundation on which to build a lasting peace, the difficulty has been in implementing the political framework. However, even if the political process comes to a desirable fruition, the development issues would still need to be addressed. Fortunately, the international community, multilateral organizations, corporations and investors continue to have a strong interest in long-term peace and development in Mindanao. They recognize and are committed to offering tangible assistance to address poverty and underdevelopment that underpin the current conflict. Despite the current difficulties, the future appears potentially positive.