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Slippery Peace in the Southern Philippines: Any Way Out?

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THE situation in the Southern Philippines is deteriorating very quickly. The slide must be arrested with a peaceful dialogue between both parties in conflict. The tripartite meeting involving the Philippine government, the OIC and MNLF must be reconvened to reassure all parties and bring them back to the negotiating table.

ON SATURDAY, 18 August 2007 the media reported that another 15 members of the Philippine Marines were killed in a fresh military encounter with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). This brought the casualties on the Philippine government side to 56, while the Moro rebels reportedly suffered twice the number. Casualties on both sides are mounting. This renewed hostility resulted in more than 20,000 civilians fleeing from the conflict area.

The deteriorating situation in the Southern Philippines is the result of the numerous postponements by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) of their much-needed tripartite meeting sought by the discontented local leaders and members of the MNLF. The tripartite meeting is supposed to address the accusations of the MNLF against the GRP's failure to implement most of the provisions of the Peace Agreement between them. The MNLF threat culminated in Major General Ben Dolorpino of the negotiation team being taken hostage on 6 February 2007. The final straw was the delay of the March 2007 meeting, which resulted in renewed hostilities in April 2007. The simultaneous attacks against military installations in Sulu resulted in heavy casualties and retaliation on both sides.

This development not only threatens to undermine the 10-year old GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement, but also compromises the wider gains of counter-terrorism efforts that are supported by United States Forces in the Southern Philippines. Until the escalation of the conflict, the US-backed Philippine military's counter-terrorism operations have been highly successful, and favourably supported by the local populace. The last thing the people wanted to see is finger-pointing and assigning blame to the presence of the US forces in the Southern Philippines for the conflict. Opponents of the efforts will use the allegations against the current administration.

The only entity seen benefiting from the escalating conflict is the combined ASG-Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist group. Aside from opening a breather from relentless military offensives against its ranks, it now has acquired a significantly enhanced combat multiplier from increasing the number of its combatants and the scope of their operations. This is made possible through the integration or direct tactical alliance with elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and MNLF forces in Basilan and Sulu provinces. Their most dangerous course of action after suffering heavy casualties

will be terrorist bombings and sabotage operations in other areas in the country, especially in urban centres.

Causes and Sources of the Problem

One MNLF complaint is the slow career advancement of those combatants that were integrated into the Philippines Armed Forces and police. Having spent many years in the jungle, they needed much adjustment and assistance in their integration to face the tough competition in their careers as army personnel or policemen. The government's failure to enhance the opportunity of former MNLF fighters has left them with a bitter feeling. This undermines the respect of the Moros for the military and police. These disillusioned combatants may become further radicalized and rejoin separatist ranks. Any failure in the peace effort could amount to a strategic blunder leading to a wastage of lives, opportunities and millions of dollars in peace investments.

Another problem is the inability of the OIC to play its role effectively as a peace mediator. Both the GRP and the MNLF believed that the OIC would have the power and influence to ensure adherence to the peace agreement in letter and substance. This was the MNLF's hope prior to the renewal of hostilities in Sulu and Basilan provinces of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The OIC's failure in this role has left serious doubts about its credibility.

Another major factor is the failure of the MNLF government in ARMM, or more precisely its inability to govern. Chairman Nur Misuari had never wielded power in the Muslim provinces, which are controlled mostly by the rich political families with their armed followers. Any peace agreement that does not define the roles of these leaders will not succeed. In fact, the non-recognition of the roles of these traditional leaders in the peace effort has been a major factor in the MNLF's failure.

What can be done?

There are three courses of action that can be pursued to resolve this impasse.

Firstly, there should be an immediate cessation of hostilities, followed by a convening of the long delayed tripartite meeting of the OIC, GRP and MNLF. This is to re-assure all parties that issues and concerns will be addressed.

Secondly, the government should avoid labeling the conflict against the MNLF and its Islamic offshoot, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as operations against the Abu Sayyaf. It will only paint the tactical victories of the Moro rebels against the military as ASG exploits and thus allow the ASG to regain its lost popularity.

Thirdly, United States Forces in Basilan and Sulu provinces could assume the role of peacekeepers, rather than be seen as helping the Philippine government contain the situation. It could be more active in the mediation of the conflict and helping to contain any escalation.

The possible role of the US as mediator reflects growing public sentiment that the OIC has lost its relevance and credibility to mediate after almost 30 years of failed mediation. Proof of this growing sentiment was the late MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat's reported letter in 2000 to President Bush, indicating the willingness of the "MILF to welcome US mediation role". Moros in Southern Philippines recall that the US more than 80 years ago (26 May 1926), chose to adopt a policy of integrating the Moro people into the main body politics of the incipient Filipino nation. This denied then Congressman Bacon's bill (House Bill 12772) to create a separate independent Southern Philippines. This "mainstreaming" policy was enforced on the Moros despite opposition from Moro Datus or nobility and remains to this day the bone of contention of all secessionist movements.

Fourthly, the Philippine government should consider a Muslim-led Unified Command in the Southern Philippines. Fielding a majority-Muslim Military Command and units will hasten winning the hearts and minds of the population. A majority Christian military unit, which has very little understanding of the culture and traditions of the Muslims, is sometimes an affront to successful military and government programmes.

In summary, there should be significant action to stop the fighting and a serious move towards a peaceful dialogue of parties in conflict. There is a need for a more wide-ranging participation of the stakeholders in the peace process, backed by stronger mechanisms to support the cessation of hostilities.

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