

The GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement: A Preliminary Assessment of its Implementation

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This article furnishes a preliminary assessment of the implementation of the 1996 peace accord between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front. Conflict resolution attempts under the Marcos and Aquino administrations are traced together with the main features of the agreement. It also elucidates the status of its implementation and identifies key problems or hindrances. The impact and implications of the achieved progress during its implementation are presented in conclusion.

Introduction

Viewed by two foreign observers as "Marcos" hidden war (Poole and Vanzi 1984: 189-207), the armed conflict in Mindanao was gory, brutal and costly. Since it began in October 1972, among its costs include an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 persons killed; more than one million persons rendered homeless and destitute; and the reported 200,000 to 300,000 Muslim refugees now in Sabah, Malaysia who fled their localities at the height of the conflict in the mid-1970s.¹ Another indicator of the severity of the conflict is the fact that during the mid-1970s, it was reported that about 80 percent of the combat strength of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was concentrated in Mindanao and Sulu.² The late president Ferdinand E. Marcos was reported to have stated that about 10,000 to 11,000 Philippine soldiers were killed in the first eight years of the war (1972-1980). It was also reported that the 1974 batch of graduates from the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) was almost wiped out in Mindanao during the height of the war in the mid-1970s.

Owing to the severity of the conflict, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) initiated some conflict resolution efforts. The first attempt was made by the Marcos regime in 1975 that led to the Peace Agreement signed in Tripoli, Libya in 1976. This effort failed due to conflicting interpretations of the key

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provisions of the Tripoli Agreement, like the requirement that its implementation shall be subject to Philippine Constitutional process (e.g. plebiscite). The second major attempt was made under the administration of former President Corazon C. Aquino that culminated with the establishment of the present four-province Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989.

Apparently, these two major attempts that spanned more than a decade failed to resolve the conflict. And because of the continuing fragility of the peace and order situation in Mindanao, given the increased military capabilities (especially in terms of armaments) of not only the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) but also other Moro revolutionary organizations like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the increasing trend towards extremism or radicalism of some new groups like the Abu Sayyaf, the GRP under former President Fidel V. Ramos elevated the Mindanao peace process to a higher level. Thus, he initiated a peace process that was broader and anchored on the imperative need to grant meaningful autonomy to the Muslims in Mindanao as contemplated in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement.

As demonstrated in the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations, the road to peace is usually long and arduous. It is certainly easier to destroy peace, than to make peace. But with GRP and MNLF peace negotiators equally concerned with making peace reign in Mindanao, their contentious differences finally gave way to the Peace Agreement that was signed on 2 September 1996. The Ramos administration's daring peace process for the Muslims and the complementary softening of the MNLF position from its previous position of secession to regional autonomy within the territorial integrity of the Philippines, had combined to make the Peace Agreement possible.

But the Peace Agreement is not the end but only a means to an end, i.e., peace and development for the long troubled Southern Philippines. It is also not self-operating or self-executing. It is only one side of the coin of peace in Mindanao. The other side is its implementation. As pointed out by one of the mediating foreign officials in the final round of the peace talks in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1996, "securing a peace agreement is one thing, while making the agreement work is another thing." The latter task is certainly more difficult and complicated.

This article presents a preliminary assessment of the implementation of the 1996 Peace Agreement between the GRP and MNLF. It traces the conflict resolution efforts under the Marcos Regime and the Aquino Administration, presents the key features of the Peace Agreement. It also discusses the status of its implementation and the identified problems or impedances, and presents some concluding statements on the impact and implications of the progress achieved in its implementation.

Past Attempts to Resolve the Conflict

Since the inception of the Moro struggle in 1972, the approach of the Philippine government remains the carrot and stick variety. But the stick aspect—the use of the state's superior instruments of violence is certainly given more emphasis. However, the Philippine experience in the past 27 years demonstrates the inefficacy of the military approach that erroneously views the armed struggle and the Moro *mujahideen* (or fighters) as the problem, not the conditions that brought them to existence. It has become increasingly obvious that the government's continued use of its military might has only sustained and intensified the armed struggle. It has only provided the armed struggle with substantial centripetal force. More Moros (including women) have been pushed to the struggle by the government's large-scale militarization and militarism in the Muslim areas in Mindanao.

Complementing the military approach are nonmilitary efforts (carrot aspect) designed to appeal to, and entice Moro *mujahideen* (especially their leaders) and their sympathizers. These include the grant of amnesty to Moro "rebels" who returned to the fold of law, the pampering of a few of the leader-returnees through offers of posts (mostly nominal and ad hoc) in the government and some business or economic opportunities, like logging concessions and funds for livelihood projects. Some so-called special agencies were created not only to give the impression that Muslim welfare is being attended to, but also as additional mechanisms to coopt some of the leaders of the *mujahideen*. Occasionally, some grandiose "programs for Muslim Mindanao" were announced.

Another carrot component is the government's "peace-making" efforts. With the increasing severity of the MNLF offensive in many parts of Mindanao and Sulu in the mid-1970s, the Marcos regime started negotiating for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in 1975. The peace negotiations under Marcos culminated with the signing of a peace agreement in Tripoli, Libya in 1976. This agreement, which is popularly known as the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, was mediated by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Tripoli Agreement provided for the grant of autonomy to 13 of the 23 provinces in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan Islands, and the cities located therein. It also provided for the establishment of a regional government that would have its own executive, legislative and judicial branches, and a regional security force independent of the AFP. Its implementation bogged down because of the conflicting interpretations of some of its key provisions. In particular, the MNLF viewed the territorial coverage to be a settled issue, i.e. thirteen provinces and the cities located therein. On the other hand, the GRP was insisting that the Agreement's provision on subjecting its implementation to constitutional processes that included the holding

of a plebiscite, suggests that only those areas voting favorably would be included in the proposed Autonomous Regional Government. After several months of lull in the fighting after the signing of the Peace Agreement, the late President Marcos unilaterally implemented his own version of autonomy by establishing two separate regional governments covering two of Mindanao's four administrative regions (Regions IX and XII) which according to Senator Santanina Rasul (1987: 126) were "regional but not autonomous."

This debacle led to the resumption of hostilities beginning in the second half of 1970s. The GRP and the MNLF blamed each other for this fiasco. Some segments of the MNLF leadership had accused the GRP of insincerity in the peace negotiations, arguing that its primary objectives in the Peace Agreement were to stop the then burgeoning offensive of a united Moro armed struggle under the banner of the MNLF, to have enough time to factionalize the leadership of the MNLF and strengthen its hard-up AFP, and to preempt an expected oil embargo by OIC-member countries who felt bad about the nonimplementation of the Tripoli Agreement by the Marcos regime.

It should be noted that the post-Tripoli Agreement resumption of hostilities was also accompanied by the factionalization of the then united MNLF. Some factions emerged, namely the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO) under the late Sultan Rasid Lucman, the MNLF-Reformist Group under Datu Dimas Pundato, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) under Aleem Salamat Hashim, its Chairman until today.

The fragmentation of the old united MNLF and the resulting demoralization among its leaders and followers were accompanied by the government's offering of amnesty and other cooptative mechanisms. These include the giving of government positions (largely in ad hoc bodies like the defunct Regional Commissions for Regions IX and XII during the Marcos Regime) and livelihood assistance projects to selected MNLF leaders. Token economic dole outs were also given to the followers of some former MNLF leaders who had the connections to influential national and regional political leaders.

But since seemingly the thrust of GRP peacemaking approach then was primarily to liquidate the MNLF challenge by sapping its superior organizational cohesion, and not to address the basic or fundamental causes of the armed struggle (e.g. economic marginalization and destitution and political domination and inferiorization), hostilities continued and the conflict's toll had increasingly gotten taller and taller as years went on. Despite the organizational splits, several brutal large-scale encounters were fought in many parts of Mindanao and Sulu in the second half of 1970s and the first half of 1980s.

The February 1986 People Power Revolution provided an opening for the bird of peace in Mindanao. With the chaotic and authoritarian Marcos era as a background, the government under former President Corazon C. Aquino unleashed several initiatives designed to bring peace and development to the country and democratize public governance. Indicative of her concern for peace in Mindanao, she broke protocol and went to Jolo, Sulu to meet with MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari. The New Constitution that her administration crafted incorporated some provisions for the establishment of autonomous regional governments for Muslim Mindanao in the South and the Cordilleras in the North. A Regional Consultative Commission (RCC) was created which proposed a draft Organic Act supposedly to assist the Philippine Congress in coming up with a legislation to implement the autonomy for Muslim Mindanao mandated by the Constitution. Capping the Aquino peace initiatives for Mindanao was the passage of the Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (R.A. 6734) on 8 June 1989 that led to the establishment of the present four-province ARMM, after the holding of the plebiscite therefore on 19 November 1989.

This legislation that the Aquino administration viewed as its blueprint for peace in Mindanao and which the government considered to be in compliance with the spirit of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement was rejected by the MNLF. Aside from its exclusion in the making of said autonomy law, the MNLF could not accept the four-province territorial coverage (based on the results of the plebiscite held therefore) and the inadequate amount of powers granted to ARMM.

As in the Marcos era, government peace initiatives for the Muslims were implemented, despite the opposition thereto, or its rejection by the Moro mujahideen. The ARMM (covering the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi) was established, with its legislative and executive organs. Shariah courts with jurisdiction for persons and family relations cases were also established in many Muslim areas in Mindanao, functioning under the Philippine Judiciary.

While the above initiatives of the Aquino administration are certainly commendable, compared to those under the Marcos regime, a painstaking review of its principal policy response, i.e. RA 6734, in the context of the very conditions that led to the Moro armed struggle would reveal its inadequacy or unresponsiveness. In other words, this autonomy law did not give the Moros and their communities the opportunity and the capability to address effectively the sufferings and insecurities associated with their current economic marginalization and destitution, political domination and incapacity, the inroads and constraints upon their cultural and Islamic identity, and the threats to their physical existence or security.³ As I had argued before, it is imperative that the government of the area of autonomy be given

the capability to be adequately self-reliant or self-sustaining, not mendicantly dependent on the central government. A basic aspect of this is financial capability. Autonomy for the Muslims is a sham if they are not given sufficient internal financial capability. Specifically, the regional government to be established must have adequate powers for revenue generation and utilization. Increased direct dole outs from the central government cannot substitute for this requirement.

Another related requirement is that the autonomy to be granted must embody some degree of compensatory justice for the Muslims. This means that the regional government must have the capability to correct or make up for some of the past injustices (i.e. the neglect and discrimination against them, and the plunder of their resources). This does not mean some form of an eye for an eye compensation. The idea is that the Muslims cannot be left autonomous in their present dispersed, disadvantaged, and impoverished situation. Autonomy for them must include a capability to overcome the crippling effects of their depressed and unjust conditions (Muslim 1994: 151-152).

Not blessed with the kind of autonomy that is required to address the basic conditions that led to the armed struggle, the ARMM failed miserably as a policy response. This dismal performance was demonstrated in the past nine years of its existence. However, while it failed to resolve the conflict, it succeeded in coopting many MNLF leaders and followers.

The Moros received with optimism the advent of the Ramos administration in 1992, particularly in relation to the Mindanao conflict. His resolve to achieve the twin goals of peace and development in the whole country necessitated the launching of serious peacemaking initiatives to all opposition or anti-government groups. With Mindanao as a primary lever in its development vision, and aware of the primordial importance thereto of an enduring peace, the Ramos administration had to introduce some major interventions to the then worsening peace and order situation in Mindanao. It had to address the declining credibility of the government not only to the mujahideen but also to the great majority of the Moro populace who felt betrayed in the ARMM experiment and other previous peacemaking efforts, and the related shift to extremism or radicalism by some of them.

The Ramos administration's peacemaking initiative envisioned a more comprehensive and enduring peace. It made some major forays into key issues or dimensions of the Mindanao conflict. One major issue addressed is the need to use the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 as a framework, move which is indispensable in ensuring the acceptance of the resulting new peace agreement not only by the Moro mujahideen and non-mujahideen, but also by the governments of the member countries of the OIC who also felt bad about the non-implementation of said agreement. This is also a brilliant move to ensure the support (especially financial) of OIC-member countries for the gargantuan task of reconstructing and rebuilding the adversely affected communities in Southern Philippines. With its addressing of

some controversial issues neglected or evaded in past peace initiatives, the Ramos administration's peace process that led to the final Peace Agreement on 2 September 1996 had to be tortuous, arduous and contentious. But committed to their peacemaking task, the GRP and the MNLF panels were able to overcome the major stumbling blocks or impedances along the road to peace in Mindanao. Their negotiation efforts for more than three years that brought them to many parts of the country and abroad (especially in Indonesia) finally bore an invaluable fruit for all Filipinos, especially Mindanaoans—the 1996 Peace Agreement.

The Peace Agreement: Its Key Features

The Peace Agreement provides for two phases or mechanisms of implementation. The first is the Transitional Period (Phase I) that covers the period from September 1996 to August 1999. A first intervention under Phase I is the creation of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) comprising 14 of Mindanao's 24 provinces (namely Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Davao del Sur, South Cotabato, Sarangani, and Palawan) and nine cities (namely Cotabato, Dapitan, Dipolog, General Santos, Iligan, Marawi, Pagadian, Zamboanga, and Puerto Princesa). It should be noted that this territorial coverage is good only for the transition period since only the provinces and cities (and possibly clusters of contiguous predominantly Muslim municipalities which may be merged to form new provinces) voting in favor of autonomy shall be included in the New Regional Autonomous Government (NRAG).

Second is the establishment of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), an agency purportedly designed to manage peace and development efforts within SZOPAD. It shall be composed of one (1) Chairman, one (1) Vice Chairman and three (3) Deputies (one each representing the Muslims, the Christians, and the non-Muslim cultural communities or highlanders) who shall be appointed by the President of the Philippines.

The SPCPD shall have the following functions (GRP 1996):

1. To take charge in promoting, monitoring and coordinating the improvement of peace and order in the area;
2. To focus on peace and development efforts more particularly in the depressed areas and cause the implementation of peace and development projects;
3. To provide support to peace and development projects;

4. To provide support to the local government units as necessary;
5. To assist in the preparation for the holding of election, referenda or plebiscite and people's initiative in the area as may be duly deputized by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC);
6. To cause the creation of such offices or instrumentalities as shall be necessary for the effective and efficient administration, subject to the approval of the Office of the President for budgetary purposes; and
7. To exercise such other powers and functions necessary for the effective implementation of its mandate as may be delegated by the President.

As provided in the Agreement, appropriate agencies of the government engaged in peace and development activities within SZOPAD such as, but not limited to the Southern Philippines Development Authority (SPDA), shall be placed under the control and supervision of SPCPD as its implementing agencies, to ensure that peace and development projects and programs are effectively accomplished. Other agencies contemplated to be placed under SPCPD are the regional and field offices of the Office on Muslim Affairs (OMA) and the Office of Southern Cultural Communities (OSCC) which are situated within the SZOPAD, Task Force Basilan (to be reorganized into Basilan Development Task Force), Task Force MALMAR (to be reorganized into Central Mindanao Development Task Force), Sulu Development Task Force, and the Special Development Planning Group, an ad hoc body composed of planning experts from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), and other concerned agencies.

Third is the establishment of a Consultative Assembly (CA) with 81 members composed of the following:

1. The Chairman of SPCPD who is the head and Presiding Officer of CA;
2. The Governor and the Vice Governor of the ARMM, the Governors of the 14 provinces, and Mayors of the nine cities within SZOPAD;
3. 44 members from the MNLF; and
4. Eleven (11) members from various sectors recommended by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs).

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The Consultative Assembly shall serve as a forum for consultation and ventilation of issues and concerns, conduct public hearings to provide appropriate advice to SPCPD, and formulate and recommend policies to the President through the Chairman of SPCPD, and make rules and regulations for the effective and efficient administration of the affairs of SZOPAD.

Fourth is the integration of qualified MNLF combatants into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP). A total of 5,750 MNLF members shall be integrated into the AFP, 250 of whom shall be absorbed into the auxiliary services thereof. In addition, another 1,750 MNLF members shall be integrated into the PNP, 250 members of whom shall be absorbed into its special or auxiliary services. This means that a total of 7,500 MNLF officers and men shall be integrated into the AFP and PNP during the Transitional Period (Phase I).

Fifth is the implementation of a special socioeconomic, cultural and educational program to cater to MNLF forces not absorbed into the AFP and PNP to prepare them and their families for productive endeavors, provide for educational, technical skills and livelihood training and give them priority for hiring in development projects.

Moreover, during the transition period, the GRP (through its Congress) shall formulate the law for the new Regional Autonomous Government, amending RA 6734 or the Organic Act for the ARMM, and conduct plebiscite therefore within two years from the establishment of the SPCPD (supposedly in 1998). One of the priority legislative agenda of the Philippine Congress today is still the bill for the proposed expanded ARMM which governs Phase II of the implementation of the Agreement.

Phase II of the Agreement's implementation involves the establishment and operationalization of the New Regional Autonomous Government (NRAG) based on the new autonomy law to be evolved, which shall commence after three years from the signing of the Agreement. It covers the period from September 1999 and onwards.

As provided in the Agreement, the NRAG shall have its own executive council, a legislative assembly, an administrative system, and representation in the national government. Moreover, it shall have its own regional security force, an educational system that incorporates the *madaris* or Islamic/Arabic schools, an economic and financial system, and Shariah courts.

Implementation: Progress and Problems/Impedances

As contemplated in the Agreement, the SZOPAD, SPCPD and Consultative Assembly were established and operationalized with the issuance of Executive Order No. 371 by former president Fidel V. Ramos on 2 October 1996. The President

appointed MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, incumbent Governor of ARMM, as Chairman of the SPCPD. Qualified nominees were also appointed to other positions in the SPCPD like the Vice Chairman and three Deputy Chairmen representing the Muslims, the Christians and the Highlanders. The Executive Director and staffs of SPCPD and the officers and members of the Consultative Assembly were also appointed.

In the area of peace building and conflict management, the government pushed through with the prescribed integration of qualified MNLF combatants into AFP and PNP. As planned after a thorough screening of the candidates for integration, qualified MNLF officers and men were sent to designated AFP and PNP camps in Mindanao and Metro Manila for the prescribed training programs. Although relatively slow and problematic (especially in the beginning), the integration process is essentially commendable. As of 26 August 1998, a total of 2,819 MNLF members were integrated into the AFP, or 49 percent of the quota target of 5,750.⁴ Moreover, another 983 MNLF members were integrated into the PNP, or 56.2 percent of the quota target of 1,750. In other words, a total of 3,802 MNLF members were integrated into AFP and PNP, or 50.7 percent of the target quota of 7,500. The agreed integration of 250 MNLF combatants into the auxiliary services of AFP and another 250 into PNP's auxiliary services is still awaiting implementation.

In peacekeeping, despite lack of power over police matters and other operating constraints, the SPCPD leadership managed to give commendable contributions to the improvement of peace and order in SZOPAD. As observed by Gen. Zainal Abidin, Commander of the OIC Monitoring Team, "there has been no occurrence of armed conflict between the security forces of the government and the MNLF" (Abidin 1998: 7-8). This demonstrated the MNLF leaders' wide influence in the Muslim communities within SZOPAD. The MNLF leadership did not only effectively police its ranks in their respective jurisdictions, but also helped in addressing peace and order problems like kidnapping. With their immersion and consequently their presence felt in many parts of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan Islands for more than two decades, the MNLF leaders and units have become effective enforcers or agents of peace and order in their respective localities. Illustrative of this is the successful involvement of MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari and his subordinate officials in the release of many kidnap victims in Southern Philippines in the past two years.

It should be noted that many of the post-Agreement peace and order problems that occurred in some parts of Mindanao involved elements or groups outside of MNLF.⁵ These include some major encounters between government forces and the MILF in some parts of Mainland Mindanao (e.g. Bagumbayan in Sultan Kudarat, Sapad in Lanao del Norte, Tungawan in Zamboanga del Sur, Pigcawayan in North Cotabato and Buldon in Maguindanao) in June and July 1998. A large-scale military engagement between the AFP and MILF occurred in Talayan, Maguindanao last

November 1998. Note that the MILF is another major Moro revolutionary group that has wide presence in Southern Philippines and is fighting for an independent Islamic state, and currently negotiating with GRP for a political settlement of the conflict.

There were some reported encounters between units of MILF and MNLF in the municipalities of Kabacan and Midsayap, North Cotabato in April and July 1998. But these were not inter-organizational or ideological conflicts between these two major Moro revolutionary organizations. They were the results of some interpersonal or interfamily feuds.

Other violent encounters were those between AFP and PNP units and the extremist Abu Sayyaf group mostly in Basilan, Sulu and Zamboanga in 1997 and 1998. A recent incident was the violent encounter in Basilan on 18 December 1998 wherein the leader of the Abu Sayyaf, Ustaj Abubakar Janjalani and Chief Inspector Reynaldo Romo, head of the PNP raiding team were killed, along with some of their followers. The Abu Sayyaf is a group of about 200 young radical Muslims, many of them trained in Libya and Afghanistan, and is demanding a separate Islamic state in Mindanao (Nawal 1998: 4).

To summarize, despite the above incidents and other disturbances like the recent bombing incidents in Jolo, Zamboanga and Basilan, the Agreement undeniably contributed to the substantial improvement of peace and order in Southern Philippines. For this, the GRP and MNLF deserve commendation for the demonstrated commitment to peace. The superb discipline of the AFP and PNP on one hand and the MNLF on the other was demonstrated in the last more than two years.

In the arena of development management, regrettably the rating is very poor. The Agreement's implementation did not bring significant contributions to its three principal clients or stakeholders, particularly the Muslims, the Christians and the Highlanders in SZOPAD. Ideally, for the Agreement to work, the formula it offers, i.e. peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Christians and Highlanders in SZOPAD under an autonomous regional politico-administrative arrangement, must be given the chance to work and be accepted by all. A basic requirement to achieve this goal is for the Agreement to contribute new improvements in the lives of all stakeholders. This certainly would require the infusion of huge amounts of new resources which could not be made available in a short period of only three (3) years.

Given the inadequacy of resources, making significant improvements in the lives of the said principal stakeholders is certainly impossible. Hence, one promising approach which is gradualist in orientation is to focus first on the needs of MNLF members and their families and the rest of the Moro communities within SZOPAD.

This does not mean discriminating against the other stakeholders (Christians and Highlanders) in development efforts under the Agreement, but a strategy to ensure the accomplishment of an acceptable level of success under Phase I, and consequently a forward movement towards the goal of establishing an expanded New Regional Autonomous Government (NRAG) under Phase II.

It should be noted that to give equal focus to the three client groups at the same time, with very limited time and development resources, would risk the possibility of no expansion, and possibly, reduction or total phase out of the present four-province ARMM. If no significant improvements are made in the predominantly Moro communities in Mindanao, it is likely that ARMM will not be expanded, or no new LGU would be added to its territorial coverage. For example, the province of Basilan and Marawi City which are predominantly Muslim and wherein the present autonomy law was defeated during the plebiscite therefore in 1989, may not be included. And the worst scenario is that if the plebiscite for the NRAG is held and the voters of the present four ARMM provinces are included, along with those in other LGUs in SZOPAD, the territorial coverage may be reduced, or even abolished entirely if the new autonomy law is defeated in all four provinces.

However, if significant accomplishments are made in the development of at least the Moro communities in SZOPAD, particularly the present four ARMM provinces, plus Basilan Province, Marawi City, and the predominantly Muslim municipalities in the other provinces in SZOPAD, then we are assured of expanding the present ARMM under Phase II, thereby addressing a very contentious issue in the peace process, i.e. territory. Thus, we will have a new regional government that consists of at least the predominantly Muslim localities or geographical areas in Mindanao. I think, the designation "Muslim Mindanao" provided in the Philippine Constitution refers to this territorial coverage, although, there is no legal impediment for the predominantly Christian areas within SZOPAD to join the said regional government.

What is disappointing about the implementation of the Agreement is the failure to make significant contributions to the lives of MNLF members, their families and their communities. Apparently, not much was done to improve the living conditions of the great majority of MNLF fighters who were not integrated into the AFP and PNP. While the Agreement had brought an appreciable improvement in the lives of the 3,802 MNLF members integrated into the AFP and PNP as of August 1998, the great majority of the estimated 68,930 MNLF men and women who are mostly sordidly poor did not benefit from the Agreement. Moreover, their depressed communities which are supposed to be given a special focus in development administration during the Transition Period (Phase I), have remained economically backward and destitute, as shown not only in government reports but also in the

needs assessment surveys (NAS) conducted under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The grandiose development programs for their communities have remained to be just dreams after more than two years from the signing of the Peace Agreement. As pointed out by the OIC Monitoring Team in its report in August 1998:

Ocular inspection and field monitoring as well as information received from various reliable sources indicated that those development projects that have so far been made have not touched the very needs and interest of the small people, especially members of the MNLF community who are found almost everywhere to the extent that those MNLFs have not been benefited by the Peace Agreement (Abidin 1998: 18).

Ideally, since Phase I is the period to build the trust and confidence of MNLF officials and men and other stakeholders with the peace formula contained in the Agreement, the GRP should have poured in new or fresh resources on top of those that government agencies and instrumentalities like ARMM, SPDA, OMA, field offices of national government agencies (NGAs) and LGUs had before the Agreement. In other words, the new resources or development inputs to be infused into the depressed communities in the SZOPAD must be over and above what these other agencies had, before the Agreement. And the main bulk of this new resources to be infused should be administered by the SPCPD and its attached agencies, while the rest may be coursed through other government agencies and instrumentalities, LGUs, NGOs and POs. The giving of SPCPD with ample resources in the depressed communities within SZOPAD would help much in enhancing its credibility as an agency for peace building and development management therein, thereby helping improve the acceptability of the peace formula that the Agreement offers.

Contrary to people's expectations, for the past two years the SPCPD was not given the resources needed for it to function as an effective agency for the development of even just the depressed communities within SZOPAD. Although it is under the Office of the President that wields much power in the allocation of budgetary resources, SPCPD remains impoverished. Its budget is largely for the salaries of its officials and personnel and for maintenance and operating expenses. As it is, SPCPD is functioning much like the ARMM and the defunct Regional Commissions for Regions IX and XII, i.e. as a mechanism for cooptation and conflict regulation, not conflict resolution.

The ARMM which should have been tapped for high impact development programs, owing to its coverage of the four of the five predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao, was not also provided with ample resources to enable it to contribute to the confidence building thrust of the Agreement. It should be noted that under Misuari's administration, ARMM was deprived of the P615 million annual seed money (earmarked for infrastructure projects) enjoyed by the region during the

terms of Regional Governors Zacaria Candao and Lininding Pangandaman.⁶ In the previous administrations of ARMM, Regional Assemblymen were allocated shares from this fund for their own projects in their respective jurisdictions. With the scrapping of this special fund, ARMM officials and offices were unable to contribute significantly to the development mandate of the SPCPD of which it is a part. As pointed out by one member of the Regional Legislative Assembly, presently they do not have much work to do, given the meager budget of the ARMM which is also barely enough for personnel salaries and maintenance and operating expenses. Moreover, the limited funds of ARMM for infrastructure projects for 1998 were subjected to 50 percent budget cut and sadly, more than 90 percent of the remaining 50 percent was not released as of September 1998 due to revenue shortfalls of the government.⁷

To recapitulate, for the last more than two years the SPCPD and the ARMM which are both under the leadership of Chairman Nur Misuari, were not provided with the resources required for them to contribute a great deal to the fulfillment of the development mandate under the Agreement. Consequently, they failed to contribute significantly to the improvement of the living conditions of the great majority of the MNLF members and their families. SPCPD's inadequacy of resources explains why its accomplishments in development management were largely in investment promotion initiatives which were buttressed by the improvement in peace and order since the signing of the Agreement, and its involvement in the integration of MNLF members into the AFP and the PNP and in some components of the fledgling UN Multi-Donor Assistance Program.⁸ Chairman Nur Misuari and other SPCPD officials played key roles in promoting many parts of SZOPAD and Mindanao and Sulu as important economic growth centers and haven for investments. Their visits abroad helped in the entry of big capitalists and businessmen to many parts of the South.

As can be gleaned from the foregoing discussion, the national government's involvement in Phase I was negligible. Its limited involvement was largely in planning and coordination of foreign funded programs and initiatives. It did not infuse additional new resources sufficient enough to undertake even just some of the many possibly small but high impact projects in the depressed communities within SZOPAD which are vital for demonstration effect and confidence building purposes. The GRP relied heavily on foreign assistance in the development efforts for SZOPAD. In other words, foreign assistance which should be a more supplementary component of the funding for development initiatives for SZOPAD, comprised the main bulk of the financial support therefore.

It should be noted that the huge chunk of the Agreement-related development activities in some areas in SZOPAD are those under the auspices of the UN Multi Donor Assistance Program for Peace and Development in the SZOPAD.⁹ This program

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consists of two phases. Its Phase I was implemented for six (6) months in six pilot areas within SZOPAD, namely: (1) Lumatil in Sarangani; (2) Salbu in Datu Piang, Maguindanao; (3) Madalum in Lanao del Sur; (4) Tictapul in Zamboanga City; (5) Indanan in Sulu; and (6) San Jose in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. The target beneficiaries was 1,800 – or 300 combatants in each of the initial six pilot projects chosen by the MNLF leaders themselves.

The program's Phase I was essentially to get to know the MNLF through a needs assessment survey (NAS) which also established a baseline survey of their socioeconomic and demographic profile, and to have first hand information on their workings through their direct participation in the implementation of the program.¹⁰ The emergency assistance in the form of food items like rice, sugar, canned goods, coffee and medicines was aimed to douse the increasing level of MNLF frustration over the seemingly slow delivery of government assistance to them as part of the expected peace dividends.

The program's Phase II (Expanded Phase) is more comprehensive. It includes the other ten MNLF states. It is a multi-component package of assistance aimed at responding to the indicated priority needs as gleaned from the NAS. It is also aimed at building bridges between the MNLF communities and the larger community that would enable the former to have better access to opportunities.

The components of Phase II correspond to the basic needs identified in the survey, namely (SPCPD-NEDA-UN 1998: 14):

1. Development of agri-based livelihood, with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as implementing agency;
2. Vocational skills training and enterprise development, implemented by the International Labor Organization (ILO);
3. Mobile information referral and community assistance services, implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM);
4. Human resource development program on leadership, with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Country Office support;
5. Delivery of basic services, that include reproductive health, with United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) support; and health and nutrition, water and sanitation, basic education, and child rights protection, with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UNDP support; and

6. Support for program management and coordination, with UNDP Country Office support.

The Phase I (Pilot Phase) of the UN Multi-Donor Program produced the following outputs:¹¹

1. Completed a needs assessment survey report based on a sample of six (6) communities and needs assessment cum community action planning exercise in ten (10) other MNLF states as a basis for project identification;
2. Delivered emergency food assistance to some 1,600 soldiers and families worth P2.24 million (US\$74,595) in seven (7) MNLF states;
3. Assisted 40 livelihood projects in seven (7) MNLF states with P14.6 million (US\$587,294) worth of inputs directly benefiting 2,600 MNLF soldiers and family members;
4. Constructed/rehabilitated community infrastructure including communal and school toilets, potable water system, school buildings, etc. in some of the pilot areas; and
5. Training programs and other related activities.

The Phase II (Expanded Phase) is not yet in full swing, although it has already taken off, with the inception of all its components in 1998. The organizational setup for program management and coordination is already in place. The IOM has already set up the information and communication infrastructure to facilitate information dissemination, sharing and advocacy. The human resource development (HRD) program for MNLF leaders and vocational/technical and enterprise development training for MNLF rank and file members and Moro women have also begun. The emergency food production component has already started, with FAO's distribution of seeds and other agricultural inputs amounting to US\$293,000 to some 5,564 soldiers and their family members in selected barangays in all of the 16 MNLF states. Finally, delivery of livelihood assistance has just started with the first one scheduled in November 1998.

As can be deduced from the preceding discussion on the implementation of the Agreement, the following are the major hindrances.

First is SPCPD's inadequate capability in development management. The Agreement does not confer sufficient capability for development management to SPCPD. It is a toothless development agency and a weak peace building instrument.

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It was not provided with the legal authority and resources to enable it to implement its own development programs. It was not blessed with concrete legal authority to influence the development efforts of the field offices of national government agencies (NGAs) and local government units (LGUs) within SZOPAD. In view of this handicap, the SPCPD has no meaningful participation or has a very minimal involvement and visibility in the development undertakings of said agencies within its jurisdiction.

Second is the weak support of the national government. This is a major impedance because under Phase I (Transitional Period), there is a need to make a visible and significant difference or improvement in the lives of MNLF members, their families and communities in a short period of time. This also suggests the unresponsiveness of the pilot area approach, considering the imperative need to make visible significant difference or improvement in the lives of MNLF members and families in every Moro community in the SZOPAD, not in just a few pilot areas.

As shown earlier, practically there was inadequate infusion of new resources. The national government relied on old or pre-existing programs of NGAs and LGUs within SZOPAD, or programs or services which the government would implement in said areas even without the Agreement. Moreover, it relied on foreign assistance which, though appreciable and commendable, is highly inadequate when juxtaposed with the multifarious development requirements of SZOPAD, especially those of the sordidly depressed Moro communities therein. This suggests a classic case of role reversal, i.e. the national government has assumed a secondary and supplemental role in connection with its development mandate under the agreement, while foreign/external entities like the UN system and other donor countries are playing a primary and dominant role.

Another indicator that government support to the implementation of the agreement is weak if not lacking is the negligible, if not absence of coordination efforts at the national level. Shortly after the signing of the agreement, former President Fidel V. Ramos issued a memorandum directing all government agencies to address the needs of MNLF members who will not be integrated into the AFP and the PNP. It was not accompanied by concrete initiatives designed to secure maximum contributions from said agencies. Its contributions are largely in the planning component, through the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA).

Third is the lack of peace building focus in development administration efforts in the depressed Moro communities within SZOPAD. While it is true that the government is in a serious financial crisis due to the Asian currency problem, post-conflict peace building within SZOPAD would have been enhanced with deliberate efforts linking many appropriate programs of NGAs and LGUs in the predominantly Muslim communities therein to the agreement. In other words, the resources or capabilities now in the hands of government entities within Moro communities must

be utilized in the achievement of the objectives of the agreement. This suggests that appropriate government programs and services therein have to be deliberately cloaked in the garb of the agreement, thus complementing whatever new development initiatives. This will help in getting maximum agreement-related benefits from the limited resources of GRP.

It is likely that the national government would not accept the observation that it has a limited contribution to the development mandate under the agreement. It is a noticeable practice of the national government in development communication for Muslim Mindanao to consider all the expenditures or programs and services of NGAs and LGUs within SZOPAD as part of its response to, or mandate under the agreement. To illustrate, development projects (e.g. power plants, telephone system, fish port complex and other major infrastructure) which were in the pipeline long before the agreement, or which the government would implement even without said agreement, are reported as part of its contribution thereto.¹² Even huge business projects of multinational corporations in the highly developed LGUs within SZOPAD are reported as part of the accomplishments under the agreement, or as conflict-related interventions. Adding up all these would give the impression that there is not much need for new conflict-related initiatives or interventions. Consequently, there is not much initiative focused to the numerous MNLF members and their poor families. The apparent inadequate interventions or peace building-oriented efforts for MNLF members and their families under Phase I (which is a period for confidence building) are certainly problematic.

Fourth is SPCPD's inadequate or lack of power in peace keeping. The existing order in SZOPAD is a classic case of disparity between authority and responsibility, or responsibility without commensurate authority. The SPCPD has a peace mandate. It is expected to play an important role in the maintenance of peace and order in SZOPAD. But a review of the agreement reveals that it is a powerless peace agency.

It should be noted that the salubrious contributions of MNLF/SPCPD officials to peace keeping in Mindanao stem largely from the goodwill and influence they have developed during pre-agreement days. As demonstrated in the last two years, MNLF/SPCPD officials are effective agents, enforcers and managers of peace. The active participation of MNLF/SPCPD officials in peace keeping and police work is cost efficient and advantageous to the government. This is because of their familiarity with individuals and communities within the SZOPAD.

Fifth is the MNLF members' unrealistic expectations and impatience. Seemingly, the great majority of the Moro masses expect a "Marshall Plan" type of development package that would address their basic individual and community needs. This perception is partly due to their belief that the agreement is designed to correct government neglect and inequity vis-à-vis Moro interests in the past. Compounding

this is the media projection during the peace negotiations of Mindanao and Sulu as the epicenter of grandiose development programs, and the related notion that anything done or undertaken in Mindanao (regardless of the specific area therein) is for the Muslims. Another contributory factor is the vague or very general language of the agreement regarding the development management role of SPCPD. The above points explain why the MNLF members are apparently impatient about the relatively slow and below par progress in the implementation of the agreement. Indicative of this is the shift to extremism or radicalism of some former MNLF members and the continuing defection of others to the MILF.

Sixth is the short duration of the Transitional Period (Phase I). Owing to the nature of Phase I as a confidence building period among stakeholders in the conflict, obviously three years is too short. The objective of ensuring wider acceptability of regional autonomy as an alternative to the GRP-Moro armed conflict cannot be realized. Moreover, with the national government's inadequate infusion of new resources to the implementation of the agreement, and the problems discussed above, there is not much confidence that can be built during the first phase.

Concluding Statements

The acceptance by the great majority of MNLF leaders and followers of the Peace Agreement and their active participation in agreement-related peace and development efforts suggest the desire of the Bangsa Moro people for genuine peace. Moreover, it also confirms the argument that the contemporary Moro armed struggle is a struggle for responsive public governance. Like other ethnic or national groups, the Moros simply want to have peace, development, participation, recognition and respect, and other fundamental human needs.

The agreement offers a promise of a more responsive governance, not only to the Muslims, but also to the Christians and the Highlanders in SZOPAD. But as discussed in the preceding section its implementation has a very limited impact to SZOPAD in general, and to the MNLF members and their families and communities in particular. The dismal performance in relation to its primary target clients – the MNLF members – suggests a failure of Phase I as a confidence building intervention. It also implies a bleak scenario for Phase II (expanded ARMM). And if the existing level of progress and accomplishments continues, the goal of expanding the present four-province ARMM may be hard to achieve.

The agreement's limited impact to MNLF members and their families and communities has the likely effect of eroding the gains made in peace keeping. It should be noted that the impressionistically favorable peace and order situation

contributed significantly by the agreement is not permanent. In fact, its fragility is getting more and more obvious as days go on. With the erosion of significant gains in peace keeping also eroding the limited gains in development, then the viability of regional autonomy as an alternative to the armed conflict will decline. This means that talking peace based on the autonomy formula may no longer be desirable. This phenomenon has already started to snowball in Mindanao. One indicator is the increasing appeal and popularity of the MILF to many MNLF members and other Moros and its shift from autonomy to independence. It should be noted that MILF Chairman Aleem Salamat Hashim was previously advocating for autonomy. His shift to independence is most likely related to the Moros' bad experience with previous experiments in regional autonomy. Another indicator is the mentioned trend towards radicalism and extremism as exemplified by groups like the Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic Command Council. If these trends continue, the spectre of more large-scale and intense GRP-Moro conflict may become likely.

Despite the above trends, and the poor progress in the implementation of the agreement, the opportunity for an enduring non-violent political settlement of the Mindanao conflict is still visible in the horizon. The peace process can still be saved. Meaningful regional autonomy is still acceptable to the majority of Muslims today, and therefore, it is still worth pursuing. However, the opportunity may be our last. Hence, it should not be allowed to slip from our hands.

While it is true that the agreement has built-in defects, when analyzed in the context of contemporary realities in Mindanao and some broader national interests, it can serve as a good beginning for a sustainable peace and development in SZOPAD. Hence, its implementation should be enhanced by addressing the identified problems or impedances. Some concrete interventions should be made to enhance the capability of SPCPD as an instrument of peace and development, infuse additional resources for development purposes, rationalize and influence the development administration efforts of NGAs and LGUs for them to contribute to peace building, strengthen the information and communication environment for the implementation of the agreement, and address the need for longer transition period to ensure successful graduation to its final phase (Phase II). Addressing the above concerns would help a great deal in ensuring the said covenant to become "the Final Peace Agreement" as contemplated by its framers. Hence, stakeholders should share in the noble task of making it work.

Endnotes

¹The number of Muslim Filipinos killed was reported to be more than 60,000. See *Dansalan Quarterly* 1983: 446-48.

²The late Benigno Aquino, Jr. reported that during the mid-seventies at the height of the campaign against the MNLF the government mobilized 60 mobile battalions spending some US \$4 million a day. See his testimony at a hearing before the US House of Representatives, Committee of Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 23 June 1983.

³For some details on the basic elements of the Moro problem or the fundamental causes of the contemporary Moro armed struggle, see Muslim 1994: 47-133 and Muslim 1995.

⁴For data on MNLF members integrated into the AFP and the PNP, see Abidin 1998: 11-13.

⁵For some details on these violent incidents, see Abidin: 8-11.

⁶Note that under Art. IX, Sec. 10 of RA 6734, the annual seed money would be provided for the first five years of ARMM.

⁷From an interview with an incumbent ARMM official, 18 September 1998.

⁸For additional discussion of the accomplishments of SPCPD, see SZOPAD Newsletter 1998.

⁹For details on the nature, approaches, components and accomplishments under Phase I of this program, see UNDP and Office of the President of the Philippines 1998; and for both its Phase I and Phase II components, see SPCPD-NEDA-UN 1998.

¹⁰For the findings of the Needs Assessment Survey, see UNDP, Office of the President of the Philippines and NEDA 1998.

¹¹For details on Phase 1 outputs, see SPCPD-NEDA-UN 1998: 14.

¹²For details on some illustrative examples, see Abidin (1998: 14-18).

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