



Mindanao, Philippines – March 2009

Executive Summary

Purpose

The purpose of the work of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) in the Philippines was to build on existing contacts in the country and to participate in the International Solidarity Conference on Mindanao (ISCM) and the direct action campaign Mindanao Peace Power Day, and by so doing, lend expertise and support to the work of Filipino civil society as they seek new strategies in pushing forward the official peace process. Dee Aker, interim executive director, and Emiko Noma, editor, carried out this work in March 2009.

Four of the previous 11 years of the peace process between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have been devoted to crafting a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), a key issue in the peace talks and an essential step in defining the ancestral homeland of the Moro people. The GRP and MILF leaders agreed to the MOA-AD and initialed the document in late July 2008. But at the signing ceremony on August 5, the Supreme Court of the Philippines issued a temporary restraining order on the signing of the agreement. Fighting between the MILF and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) broke out immediately, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians and dashing the hopes of millions who saw the end of the decades-long war in sight.

With this situation as a backdrop, the Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC) – a reputable civil society network that brings together the “tri-peoples” of Mindanao: Bangsamoro, Christians and Indigenous Peoples – convened the ISCM to generate and widen international community support to the Mindanao peace process, identify critical roles for the international community in addressing the conflict, and strengthen working mechanisms in maximizing support to peace and development on the island. Furthermore, the caucus organized a direct non-violent action across the island to mobilize civil society to demand a return to the peace talks and to offer a chance for international delegates to extend solidarity to evacuees and those most affected by the violence.

Insights

Active participation in the conference and campaign led to several insights. On the political level, there was unanimous consent that little can move forward as long as Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is still president. Her administration has lost trust and credibility over the MOA-AD debacle. Though the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, Avelino Razon, Jr., remarked during the conference that 2009 will be a “comeback year for the GRP-MILF peace process,” any efforts toward reviving it are seen as insincere – merely a last-ditch attempt for high marks on the presidential scorecard as Arroyo leaves office. Instead, most peace advocates are looking to craft an “Agenda for 2010,” the presidential election year. It is essential that the GRP-MILF peace process be made an election issue; it should be part of the national dialogue and not be sidelined until after the next president takes office.

The Supreme Court also ruled in October 2008 that by not making public the contents of the negotiations or the final draft of the MOA-AD, the government failed to consult all sectors of society. This came as the result of complaints by local government officials from primarily Christian areas of Mindanao that were included in the territory proposed in the MOA as the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, the homeland of the Bangsamoro. To remedy the lack of consultation, the Bishops Ulama Conference – an interfaith group – working with a team of academic researchers, will conduct focus group discussions and community dialogues. The team plans to carry out the consultations in June and July of this year, with the findings published in a report by the end of the year. While this is an important first step of getting civil society involved, it begs the questions of why this did not happen prior to the rejection of the MOA-AD, is six months an adequate timeframe for the process, and furthermore, as analyzed in the International Crisis Group’s February 2009 report, are there specific mechanisms for how the final report will feed into the official peace process?

Though the MOA-AD has been rejected by the Supreme Court, if the government does not take seriously the issue of the Moro homeland and some degree of self-governance – the roots of the conflict being Moro marginalization and disempowerment – the war will no doubt escalate. In several private settings, the IPJ heard comments from both Muslims and Indigenous people that the so-called rogue commanders who the AFP are hunting (the justification for much of the current violence) are seen as “heroes” to countless fellow Muslims and Indigenous people, because they are the only ones seen as standing up for their rights and not being humiliated by the GRP and AFP.¹ The thousands upon thousands of desperate youth – including young boys – attest to the potential for pronounced violence should they be mobilized for the MILF’s armed struggle.

Finally, the people on the ground who are suffering most from this latest round of violence are desperate. Their hopes were set high by the prospect of the MOA-AD and a final peace agreement – and they are thus devastated by the failure of the MOA, and the violence and subsequent displacement. From comments made throughout the conference and as witnessed during Peace Power Day, many Mindanaons are looking for external saviors – particularly, more involvement from the United Nations and powerful international players. Others are less thrilled by the prospect of heavy external involvement – given the country’s colonial history and continued U.S. military aid to the GRP – and would like to see international involvement take the form of international experts who can provide new strategies and think “outside the box” on tactics to make the peace process succeed.

Products and Future Engagement

Several important products were gained through the IPJ’s time in Mindanao, including selection for the Steering Committee of the ISCM; interactions with several key stakeholders in the conflict; observations of an IPJ Woman PeaceMaker, including monitoring her efforts on the ground; and the dissemination of conference resolutions and information on the situation in Mindanao.

The IPJ has been invited by the MPC to return to Mindanao to develop a partnership between youth in the conflict-affected areas and the United States, through the IPJ’s WorldLink Program.

¹ Commanders Kato and Bravo are considered “rogue” commanders of the MILF, who have committed ceasefire violations and killed AFP soldiers. The government said it will not halt its offensives until they are captured. It is unclear how much control MILF leadership has over the two commanders.

The MPC's intent is to disseminate – on a global scale – information regarding the effects of the armed conflict and the peace process, in an attempt to “internationalize” support for the peace process and the end of the war. The MPC invitation allows the IPJ to explore how the WorldLink Program can further these efforts in promoting solidarity among youth on a global level for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. IPJ staff members have secured funding for a return to Mindanao in early 2010 to work with both youth and high-level women leaders to advance their participation in decision making.