

By Macapado A Muslim

Sustaining the constituency *for Moro autonomy*

The Agreement signed in 1996 represents not so much an end to the process — peace and development for the long troubled Southern

Philippines — as a means to that end. It is not self-executing. As pointed out by a mediating foreign official in the final round of the peace talks in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1996, ‘securing a peace agreement is one thing. Making the agreement work is another’. The latter task is certainly more complex.

Previous attempts to resolve the conflict between the Moros and the Philippine state by offering autonomy for Muslim Mindanao failed largely because of the inadequate powers assigned to the autonomous governments. Two things are essential for meaningful Moro autonomy:

- ◆ The capability to be adequately self-sustaining, not dependent on the central government. A basic aspect of this is financial capacity. Autonomy for the Muslims is a sham if they are not given sufficient internal financial capacity. Specifically, the regional government

must have adequate powers for revenue generation and utilisation. Handouts from central government cannot substitute for this.

- ◆ 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. neglect and discrimination and the plunder of their resources). This does not mean some form of ‘an eye for an eye’ compensation, but Muslims cannot be expected to embrace autonomy 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.

The 1996 Peace Agreement provides for two phases of implementation. The first phase, a three-year transition period (see box, p. 30), is to be followed by the establishment of a New Regional Autonomous Government (NRAG) which will operate in Phase II. This second phase covers the period from September 1999

Ex-combatants with a staff member of the International Organisation for Migration, at the MNLF Camp Morolandia, Mala Balt island in Lake Lanao

Source: Bobby Timonera



onwards and does most to meet Moro aspirations for real autonomy. The NRAG will have its own executive council, a legislative assembly, an administrative system, as well as representation in the national government. It will also have its own regional security force, an educational system that incorporates the *madaris* (Islamic/ Arabic schools), tax raising powers and Shariah courts. The area covered by the NRAG will be determined by a plebiscite. The first phase of the agreement covers the period from September 1996 to August 1999 (see box overleaf for key features).

Progress and problems

As provided for in the Peace Agreement, the SZOPAD, SPCPD and Consultative Assembly were established when then President Ramos issued Executive Order No. 371 on 2nd October 1996. The President appointed MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, incumbent Governor of ARMM, as Chairman of the SPCPD. Qualified nominees were appointed to other positions in the SPCPD and the Consultative Assembly.

Keeping the peace

The government pushed through the integration of qualified MNLF combatants into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the police. After a thorough screening of the candidates for integration, MNLF officers and men entered training programmes. Although relatively slow and problematic, the integration process has essentially worked. As of August 1998, a total of 3,802 MNLF members were integrated into the AFP and the police, or 50.7% of the target of 7,500. The agreed integration of 250 MNLF combatants into the auxiliary services of the AFP and another 250 into police auxiliary services is still awaiting implementation.

In peacekeeping, despite lack of power over police matters and other operating constraints, the SPCPD leadership has contributed to the improvement of peace and order in SZOPAD. In August 1998 General Zainal Abidin, Commander of the Monitoring Team of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), reported, 'there has been no occurrence of armed conflict between the security forces of the government and the MNLF'. This

Key features of Phase I of the Peace Agreement

1. Creation of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) comprising 14 of Mindanao's 24 provinces (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 (Cotabato, Dapitan, Dipolog, General Santos, Iligan, Marawi, Pagadian, Zamboanga, and Puerto Princesa). This territorial coverage applies only to the transition period. Only the provinces and cities (and possibly clusters of contiguous predominantly Muslim municipalities which may be merged with existing provinces) voting in favour of autonomy will be included in the New Regional Autonomous Government.

2. Establishment of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) to manage peace and development efforts within SZOPAD. The Agreement states that it shall be composed of one chairman, one vice-chairman and three deputies (one each representing the Muslims, the Christians, and the non-Muslim cultural communities or Highlanders) to be appointed by the President of the Philippines. The SPCPD's task is to oversee 'peace and development efforts' – a term which seems to cover anything from road-building to irrigation projects to catching criminals or providing emergency aid to disaster victims – in the SZOPAD.

The SPCPD has the following functions:

- ◆ promoting, monitoring and co-ordinating the improvement of peace and order in the SZOPAD;
- ◆ instigating implementation of peace and development projects;
- ◆ supporting peace and development projects;
- ◆ providing support to local government units as necessary and;
- ◆ assisting in the preparation of elections, plebiscites or other voting exercises in the area if deputised by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC).

It has the power to:

- ◆ create offices or institutions needed for effective and efficient administration, as long as the Office of the President approves the funds for them; and
- ◆ exercise other powers and functions necessary for effective implementation of its mandate if delegated by the President.

Government agencies engaged in peace and development activities in SZOPAD (for example, the Southern Philippines Development Authority, among others) will be placed under the control and supervision of SPCPD as implementing agency, to ensure that peace and development projects and programmes are effectively accomplished.

3. Establishment of a Consultative Assembly (CA) with 81 members composed of:

- ◆ Chairman of SPCPD as head and presiding officer;
- ◆ Governor and Vice Governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the governors of the 14 provinces, and mayors of the nine cities within SZOPAD;
- ◆ members from the MNLF; and
- ◆ members from various sectors recommended by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and people's organisations (POs).

The Consultative Assembly serves as a forum for consultation and ventilation of issues and concerns, conducts public hearings to provide advice to SPCPD, recommends 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.

4. Integration of 7,500 qualified MNLF combatants into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP). A total of 5,750 MNLF members are to be integrated into the AFP, 250 of them to be absorbed into the auxiliary services. Another 1,750 MNLF members are to be integrated into the PNP, 250 of them in special or auxiliary services.

5. Implementation of special socio-economic, cultural and educational programmes to cater to MNLF forces not absorbed into the AFP and PNP; to prepare them and their families for productive work, provide educational, technical skills and livelihood training and give them priority in hiring for development projects.

6. Formulation (through Congress) of a law for the New Regional Autonomous Government, amending the Organic Act for the existing ARMM, and conduct of a plebiscite within two years of the establishment of the SPCPD (originally in 1998). One of the priority legislative agenda items of the Philippine Congress today is the bill for the proposed expanded ARMM which governs Phase II of the implementation of the Peace Agreement. ■

Election day in the Autonomous Region, Indanan, Jolo, September 1996

Source: Maria Suleiman



demonstrates the MNLF leaders' wide influence in Muslim communities within SZOPAD, effectively policing their own ranks and helping to address peace and order problems such as kidnapping. Having made their presence felt in many parts of Mindanao, Sulu and the Palawan Islands for more than two decades, MNLF leaders and their units have become effective enforcers of peace and order in their localities.

The outbreaks of violence that have occurred in some parts of Mindanao after the peace agreement have involved elements outside the MNLF. These include major encounters between government forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in some parts of mainland Mindanao. The MILF is another large Moro revolutionary group with a wide presence in Southern Philippines.

Encounters between MILF and MNLF units were reported in North Cotabato in April and July 1998, but these were the result of interpersonal or inter-family feuds, rather than conflict between the two major Moro revolutionary organisations.

Other violent encounters include those between the armed forces and police, on the one hand and the radical Abu Sayyaf (see *Profiles*, p. 88) in 1997 and 1998. Abu Sayyaf is a group of about 200 young radical Muslims, many of them trained in Libya and Afghanistan, who are demanding a separate Islamic state in Mindanao. Despite these and other incidents, the Peace Agreement contributed to a substantial improvement in peace and order in Southern Philippines.

Development

In the arena of development, regrettably, the rating is very poor. The Agreement's implementation has not brought significant gains to its three principal stakeholders: the Muslims, Christians, and Highlanders in SZOPAD. The Agreement offers a formula for peaceful coexistence under an autonomous regional politico-administrative arrangement. This should be given the chance to work and to be accepted by all. Ideally, the Agreement needs to improve the lives of all stakeholders. This would require huge amounts of new resources, which could not be made available in only three years.

The wives of MNLF combatants inspect farm tools given by the UN-multi-donor assistance programme

Source: Bobby Timonera



Without such resources it is impossible to give equal focus to the three client groups at the same time. Hence the need for a gradual approach focusing first on the MNLF members and their families and the remaining Moro communities within SZOPAD. This does not mean discriminating against the other stakeholders (Christians and Highlanders) in development efforts under the Agreement, but developing a strategy to ensure sufficient progress under Phase I to move forward to the goal of an expanded NRAG under Phase II.

Significant development for the Moro communities in SZOPAD would ensure a new regional government that consists of the predominantly Muslim localities in Mindanao: the four provinces of the present ARMM, plus Basilan Province, Marawi City and Muslim municipalities elsewhere in SZOPAD. This would address a very contentious issue in the peace process: territory.

Spreading the resources over all three groups risks the possibility of a vote against expansion of the present ARMM in the plebiscite, or even

a vote to reduce it or abolish it altogether. If no significant improvements are made for the largely Moro communities in Mindanao, the constituency willing to accept autonomy (rather than an independent state as advocated by the MILF) could shrink, and even vanish altogether.

So far, little has been done to improve the living conditions of the great majority of MNLF fighters. While the Agreement appreciably improved the lives of the MNLF members integrated into the armed forces and police, the great majority of the estimated 68,930 MNLF men and women remain sordidly poor. Moreover, their depressed communities have remained economically backward and destitute. As the OIC Monitoring Team pointed out in its report in August, 1998:

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.

Ideally, since Phase I is the period to build the trust and confidence of MNLF members and other stakeholders in the peace formula contained in the Agreement, the government should have poured in fresh resources over and above those already allocated to government agencies before the Agreement. The bulk of this should have been allocated to the SPCPD and its attached agencies. This would have helped to enhance its credibility as an agency for peacebuilding and development management, thereby helping improve the acceptability of the peace formula that the Agreement offers.

Contrary to people's expectations, over the last two or three years the SPCPD has not been given the resources it needs to function as an effective development agency. It remains impoverished as its budget is largely for the salaries of its officials and personnel, maintenance and operating expenses. SPCPD is functioning much like the ARMM and the defunct Regional Commissions for Regions IX and XII: as a mechanism for co-option and conflict regulation, not conflict resolution.

The ARMM, which should have funded high impact development programmes, owing to its coverage of the four of the five predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao, also lacks the resources to contribute to the confidence building thrust of the Peace Agreement. The ARMM under Misuari was even deprived of the 615 million pesos in annual seed money (earmarked for infrastructure projects) which the region enjoyed during the terms of previous Regional Governors. Moreover, the ARMM's limited budget for infrastructure projects in 1998 was cut by 50% and sadly, less than 10% of the remaining 50% had been released as of September 1998 because of a government revenue shortfall.

The UN Multi-Donor Assistance Programme

The Philippine government has relied heavily on foreign assistance in development efforts for SZOPAD. In some areas, the most visible development activities are those under the auspices of the UN Multi-Donor Assistance Programme for Peace and Development.

The programme started with a pilot phase limited to six areas within SZOPAD, targeting 1,800 beneficiaries — or 300 ex-combatants in each site. The pilot phase aimed to get to know the MNLF through a needs assessment survey and to have first hand information on their workings through their direct participation in implementing the programme. Emergency assistance in the form of food and medicines aimed to douse the increasing frustration at the slow delivery of government assistance as part of the expected peace dividends. This phase has been completed.

The second expanded phase is more comprehensive and covers all MNLF areas. This is under way. Its various components aim to respond to the priorities indicated by the needs assessment survey. It also aims to build bridges between the MNLF and the wider community that would provide better access to opportunities.

The package includes livelihood programmes, vocational skills training and enterprise development, information referral and community assistance, and delivery of basic services (health and nutrition, reproductive health, water and sanitation, basic education, and child rights protection). Its other major component is training MNLF commanders to become effective development managers. Several UN agencies are supporting the effort. The UN Development Programme Country Office coordinates the programme, which is managed in collaboration with senior MNLF commanders.

The programme is addressing the needs of MNLF communities. However, the pilot area approach had the disadvantage of delaying delivery of assistance to all but a select few of the former combatants. This fuelled the impatience of the rest and went against the egalitarian ethos at the basis of the MNLF's organisational cohesion. Now that the programme has expanded, the main concern is continuity. How will the basic services it provides be maintained when the UN aid agencies pull out?

SPCPD's accomplishments in development management have been limited to investment promotion initiatives, improvement in peace and order situation, involvement in the integration of MNLF members into the armed forces and police, and in components of the UN Multi-Donor Assistance Programme (see box, p. 33). Chairman Nur Misuari and other SPCPD officials have promoted SZOPAD, and Mindanao and Sulu in general, as important economic growth centres. Their efforts have helped attract investors to many parts of the South.

The national government's involvement in Phase I has been limited to the planning and co-ordination of foreign funded programmes and initiatives. But major problems exist in implementing Phase I of the Peace Agreement. The SPCPD has inadequate capability in development management. It is a toothless development agency and a weak peace building instrument. It lacks the authority and the resources to implement its own programmes and the legal authority to influence the development efforts of national or local government agencies or units within the SZOPAD. Thus it has minimal involvement and visibility in the development undertakings of such agencies.

The national government has provided only weak support, particularly in terms of resources. This is a major impediment because of the need to make a visible and significant difference in the lives of MNLF members, families and communities in the short time allowed for Phase I. Moreover, the government's overwhelming reliance on foreign assistance suggests that it has assumed a secondary and supplemental role in its development mandate under the Peace Agreement, while the UN system and other external donors play a primary and dominant role. This does little to reassure Muslims accustomed to neglect from central government.

There is a lack of peacebuilding focus in the development efforts in the depressed Moro communities within SZOPAD. While the

government does face a serious financial crisis owing to the Asian currency problem, post-conflict peacebuilding within SZOPAD would have been enhanced by efforts to link national and local government development efforts in the predominantly Muslim communities in the area.

National government considers all the expenditure, programmes and services of national and local government agencies within SZOPAD as part of its response to the Agreement. Thus it reports development projects (e.g. power plants, telephone lines, fish port complex and other major infrastructure) which were in the pipeline long before the Agreement as part of its contribution. Even business projects of multinational corporations are reported as accomplishments under the Agreement, or as conflict-related interventions. Consequently, few initiatives are focused on MNLF members and their families.

The absence of peacekeeping powers for the SPCPD has also proved a problem. Although it is expected to play an important role in maintaining peace and order in SZOPAD, it lacks the authority to do so. The contributions MNLF/SPCPD officials have been able to make to peacekeeping in Mindanao stem largely from the goodwill and influence developed during the pre-Agreement days. Their participation in peacekeeping and police work is cost efficient and advantageous to the government, because of their familiarity with individuals and communities in the SZOPAD.

Some MNLF members have unrealistic expectations. They and the great majority of the Moros expect a Marshall Plan type of development package that would address their basic individual and community needs. They believe the Agreement should correct government neglect and the inequitable approach to Moro interests in the past. Compounding this is the media projection of Mindanao and Sulu as the epicentre of grandiose development programmes, and the related notion that anything done in Mindanao (regardless of the specific area) is

done for the Muslims. Another contributory factor is the vague language of the Agreement regarding the development management role of SPCPD. All this explains why, after two and a half years, MNLF members seem impatient with the relatively slow progress in implementing the agreement. The result is the shift of some former MNLF members to more extreme views, and the continuing defection of others to the MILF (see interview, p. 36).

Finally, the duration of the transition period (three years) is too short for confidence building among stakeholders in the conflict and ensuring wider acceptability of regional autonomy as an alternative to armed conflict.

Conclusion

The great majority of MNLF leaders and members have accepted the Peace Agreement and subsequently participated in peace and development efforts. This demonstrates the Bangsamoro desire for peace and confirms that the Moro armed struggle is a struggle for responsive governance. Like other ethnic or national groups, the Moros simply want peace, development, participation, recognition and respect.

The Agreement offers a promise of more responsive governance, not only to Muslims, but also to Christians and Highlanders in the SZOPAD. But its implementation has so far had a very limited impact on the region in general, and the MNLF members, their families and communities in particular. The dismal performance in relation to the 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). If the existing level of progress continues, the goal of expanding the present four-province ARMM may be hard to achieve.

The limited impact on MNLF members is likely to erode the gains made in peacekeeping. The reduction in violence facilitated by the MNLF and SPCPD is not permanent. Its fragility is growing increasingly obvious. The erosion of significant gains in peacekeeping will erode the limited gains in development, and then the viability of regional autonomy as an alternative to armed conflict will decline. The increasing appeal and popularity of the MILF to many MNLF members and others shows this process has already started. Another indicator is the trend toward radicalism and extremism exemplified by groups like the Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic Command Council. If these trends continue, more large-scale and intense conflict between the Philippine government and the Moros is likely.

Despite these trends and the poor progress in implementing the Peace Agreement, the opportunity for an enduring political settlement of the Mindanao conflict remains within reach. The peace process can still be saved. Meaningful regional autonomy is still acceptable to the majority of Muslims, and is therefore still worth pursuing. However, this opportunity may be the last. It should not be allowed to slip from our hands.

While it is true that the Agreement has some in-built defects, it can serve as a good beginning. Addressing the problems identified above would enhance its implementation. The stakeholders should share in the task of making it work. ■