



*The ARMM Roundtable Series brings together academics and leaders in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to a discussion and analysis of critical issues in the autonomous region. This paper builds on the output of the discussions. Views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of Notre Dame University and the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung.*

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# PEACEKEEPING IN THE ARMM

## INTRODUCTION

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is the fruit of the struggle of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) for the self-determination of the Bangsamoro. With the signing of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement in 1996, a new age has dawned where the national government and the MNLF agreed to make autonomy as a vehicle for peace and development in Southern Philippines. With the negotiated settlement between the GRP and the MNLF, the peace that has eluded the inhabitants of the region for years seemed close at hand. However, peace remained elusive even after the peace agreement and the establishment of the autonomous region. Clan wars, terrorism and calls for secession still persist. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a splintered group of the MNLF, is still locked in difficult peace process with the national government that seems to have limited options to offer owing to its agreement with the MNLF.

With the signing of the Peace Agreement and the mainstreaming of the MNLF in the body politic with its leaders and members taking on leadership role in the autonomous region, the ARMM is expected to play a central role in keeping the peace in the area of autonomy. The integration of the MNLF members to the Philippine National Police and the armed Forces of the Philippines is not only an arrangement to provide employment to MNLF combatants and their relatives but an avenue where the “mainstreamed” MNLF takes on the responsibility of keeping the peace in the region.

After the peace agreement and the enactment of the ARMM Organic Law, to what extent is the ARMM involved in keeping the peace in the area of autonomy? What should be the role of the ARMM in peacekeeping? What are the legislations the Regional Legislative Assembly of the ARMM must pass to strengthen peacekeeping in the ARMM? To what extent does the integration of the MNLF members in the AFP and the PNP contributing in keeping the peace in the ARMM? These important questions are the subject of the roundtable discussion on “Peacekeeping in the ARMM” held on July 19, 2004 in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi.

## **ARMM AND PEACEKEEPING: A WIDE GAP**

The participants in the roundtable discussion are one in saying that the ARMM is barely involved in keeping the peace in the autonomous region. The Philippine National Police, Armed Forces of the Philippines and other law-enforcement agencies operating in the autonomous region are administered and controlled by their respective national headquarters. According to Assemblyman Tommy Ala, the ARMM is not fully involved in peacekeeping because the instrumentalities provided for in Art. XIII of the Organic Law to oversee the security in the ARMM remain unorganized. These instrumentalities are the Regional Security Force (Sec. 2), the Regional Police Commission (Sec. 10), and the Regional Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (Sec. 11). While the Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA) is supposed to confirm nominees by the Regional Governor to the Regional Police Commission, no such confirmation process has ever taken place. Assemblyman Ala laments that the ARMM has not even taken a position on the issue of the joint U.S-Philippine military exercises in Carmen, Cotabato when these activities can potentially ignite a shooting war between the MILF and the Philippine military. To date, the RLA has yet to pass the law that will govern the Regional Police Force consistent with the Constitution and the Organic Act. In the case of the Regional Command of the AFP, the Executive Order creating the Command has already been signed by the President but the details of its implementation are yet to be worked out with the AFP hierarchy. In the absence of these instrumentalities, the ARMM's role in peacekeeping is almost nil. This is tragic since the Organic Law mandates that the Regional Government shall give priority to the maintenance and preservation of law and order for the establishment of peace and the protection of life, liberty and property of the people in the autonomous region (Sec. 1, Art. XIII). The Organic Law has also given the autonomous region authority particularly over the Regional Police Force when it grants the Regional Governor the power to exercise operational control and general supervision and disciplinary powers over the Regional Police Force (Sec. 8, Art. XIII).

## **PEACEKEEPING: A BROAD CONCEPT**

*“The root causes of ‘peacelessness’ are multi-faceted– political, economic and socio-cultural. Peacekeeping as a set of activities to reduce or eradicate armed conflict and violence by military and police action alone is a very limited view that will not bring sustainable peace and development.”*

While participants lament the inability of the ARMM to take a leading role in marshalling law enforcement agencies in the autonomous region in peacekeeping activities, they are also one in saying that peacekeeping is a broader concept that embraces not only war against criminality and terrorism but also the war against poverty, ignorance, discrimination and inequality in the autonomous region. The root causes of “peacelessness” are multi-faceted– political, economic and socio-cultural. Peacekeeping as a set of activities to reduce or eradicate armed conflict and violence by military and police action alone is a very limited view that will not bring sustainable peace and development.

Considering the broader concept of peace as not merely the absence of war but also the establishment of structures that will promote social justice, the ARMM, having the primary responsibility in keeping the peace in the autonomous region, is expected to undertake programs to address poverty,

ignorance and inequities endemic in the region. Its peacekeeping role must be two-pronged: taking the lead in the campaign against all forms of criminality and terrorism in the region and as acting as a strong and effective advocate to uplift the quality of life of the inhabitants of the region. In other words, it must not only get involved in combating criminal and terroristic acts but it must also actively address the root causes of these acts. Unfortunately, the participants in the discussion are of the belief that the ARMM is a failure in both.

In a paper presented during the discussions, Manzur B. Sakili, general Manager of Tawelco in Tawi-Tawi, says that the ARMM can participate in peacekeeping in the area of autonomy by focusing on the following:

- Improving the economic conditions of its people. Better facilities such as water, power, better roads and other infrastructures must be present.
- ARMM must adopt a corporate culture of honesty, efficiency and team-building.
- It should improve its taxing powers where the region can have its won money and not too dependent on the national government.
- It should patronize its won services and products where meetings, conferences and conventions be held in area of autonomy.
- Foreign assistance for the autonomous region must be distributed equitably in all the provinces and city of the ARMM.
- It should improve its delivery of basic services less of useless talks and politics.
- It should adopt its own education system like in Malaysia and Indonesia that is suitable to the region's culture, customs and aspirations.
- ARMM should be a role mode by exercising leadership by example.

Mr. Sakili adds that the ARMM can be said to be involved in peacekeeping only when it can muster the political will to institute the reforms mentioned above. It is only when leaders admit their own mistakes and weaknesses and live by the way of Islam as a religion of submission and peace that the regional government can lead the way to peace and prosperity.

## **INDIGENOUS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES**

The ARMM can be instrumental in keeping the peace in the region by harnessing and promoting indigenous conflict management mechanisms. The Organic Law mandates that the Regional Government shall recognize indigenous structures or systems which promote peace, law and order (Sec. 13, Art. XIII). As an example, a participant observed that during the incumbency of Regional Governor Liningning Pangandaman, he created the Regional Reconciliation and Unification Commission (RRUC) to facilitate dialogue toward peaceful resolution of conflicts between feuding political families. The RRUC then was able to forge peace pacts that largely contributed to the improvement of peace and order conditions in the autonomous region. There are other informal systems that help resolve conflicts such as the Agama or Council of Elders in the grassroots Moro communities. The ARMM must promote these indigenous ways of conflict prevention, management and resolution as a way to keep the peace in the region.

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## MNLF INTEGRATION IN THE PNP AND AFP

There were concerns raised on whether the integration of MNLF members into the PNP and the AFP has significantly contributed to peace in the region. The following observations were made: First, those integrated were not MNLF combatants who at this time are already in their advanced years. Most “integrees” are relatives and neighbors of former MNLF combatants. Second, many of the integrees have qualifications below the standards of the PNP and the AFP raising concerns about their capabilities as “peacekeepers”. There were not a few occasions where PNP integrees abandon their assignments just to go back to their hometowns. Third, the integrees have not been formed as a viable and coherent force to make a positive impact on peacekeeping in the area of autonomy.

Notwithstanding the reservations that were raised on the wisdom of integration, the participants acknowledge that there is value added to peacemaking in mainstreaming some young Moros in the police and military forces. However, the national government, ARMM and the MNLF must insure that the integration is not meant to provide employment but really a step forward in providing the Moros the opportunity to be responsible for keeping the peace in their areas.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The roundtable participants called on the autonomous government to demonstrate political will in dismantling “private armies” and in controlling “loose firearms” that largely contribute to instability in the autonomous region. The call of the times is not for a military but a political and economic solution to the Bangsamoro problem.
- The ARMM must strengthen its partnership with the Local Government Units- the frontliners in peacekeeping. A mechanism for ARMM-LGU coordination in peacekeeping including the delivery of basis services must be made operational.
- The Regional Legislative Assembly must immediately pass crucial legislations such as the law that will govern the Regional Security Force to strengthen ARMM’s law enforcement capabilities as well as its capacity to promote human development in the region.
- Strengthen the information agencies of the autonomous region that can actively disseminate information on the laws already passed by the RLA and the programs of the ARMM. They must foster strong partnerships with private media institutions to promote peace and development in the region.
- The establishment of a working Regional Security Force and AFP Regional Command must be pursued as the mechanisms for ARMM’s greater role in peacekeeping.