

The Mindanao Peace Process: Initiatives Toward Peace and Development Following the Cessation of Hostilities in Southern Philippines

ALEXANDER P. AGUIRRE

National Security Adviser Alexander Aguirre believes that the Mindanao problem cannot be solved by the military option alone. In fact, the government is determined to settle the MILF problem through peaceful means, specifically through the Strategy of Total Approach. This course of action serves as the overall strategy in dealing with insurgencies. It consists of policies and programs that would effectively and simultaneously address the political, socio-economic and security aspects of the Mindanao problem. It aims to restore and maintain peace in Mindanao and to pursue the reconstruction and socio-economic development in the war-torn region. But while the government is committed to the peaceful solution to the conflict it will remain vigilant in performing its constitutional duty to preserve law and order, to protect the people from lawless violence, and ensure the nation's territorial integrity.

I would like to express our thanks and gratitude to the organizers of this forum for allowing the government the opportunity to provide you with our perspective on the Mindanao situation and the efforts being undertaken to attain sustainable peace and development in that part of the country.

In the President's State of the Nation Address during the opening of the Third Regular Session of the 12th Congress on July 24, 2000, a substantial part was devoted to the efforts at addressing the Mindanao problem — for indeed, the recent hostilities in Southern Philippines had derailed many of government's political and socio-economic initiatives in the region. The President thus specifically vowed, among others, a new beginning for Mindanao through purposive and determined efforts to bring peace and development.

In this regard, I would like to present a brief historical perspective of the government's actions in relation to the Mindanao problem, and provide information on the government's current policy and strategic responses to address the problem.

The GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement

It will be recalled that the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) held peace talks with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) starting even way back in the 1970s, under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), to help resolve the decades of armed conflict in Mindanao. This led to the conclusion of the Tripoli Peace Agreement, which was signed on December 23, 1976 in Tripoli, Libya.

The 1976 Tripoli Agreement was implemented by the GRP, but there were objections from the MNLF on the manner by which it was being implemented, ultimately causing the MNLF to withdraw its participation from the Agreement.

During the term of President Ramos, the MNLF was persuaded to return to the negotiating table. After patiently undertaking three more years of negotiations, a new Peace Agreement was finally concluded on September 2, 1996, which in effect, was an operational implementation of the Tripoli Peace Agreement.

With the signing of the 1996 Peace Agreement, the OIC acknowledged it as a just, comprehensive and lasting fulfillment of the Filipino Muslims' quest for effective autonomy and meaningful self-governance under the Philippine Constitution.

The MILF's Bid for Independence

While the peace talks with the MNLF were then being undertaken by the government in the 1970s, former MNLF members, led by Hashim Salamat, separated from the leadership of Nur Misuari to form the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with the objective of pursuing secession and establishing an independent state in Southern Philippines, contrary to the OIC-sponsored autonomy. Had the MILF not separated from the MNLF, then probably peace and development in Mindanao could have been pursued smoothly.

The Peace Process with the MILF

Even with the signing of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement, the Government immediately initiated peace talks with the MILF to solve the MILF problem politically, and allow their inclusion in the autonomous region. Through the peace talks, an opportunity was extended to the MILF to improve on the Peace Agreement in such a manner that they may suggest refinements that could enhance the autonomy into its most meaningful form, but within the ambit of our Constitution.

However, in the last three years of peace talks with the MILF, mostly procedural matters were discussed in the negotiations. The MILF had dilly-dallied. Thus, three years were more or less wasted because we could have talked on more substantive political matters to solve the problem.

Activities of the MILF and Government's Responses

While the peace talks between the Government and the MILF were continuing during those three years, the MILF took advantage of the peace process by building up their army, with continuing recruitment and training of manpower, and procurement of weapons and other war materials. There were also many occasions when the MILF violated the ceasefire agreement with the government.

These violations consisted of harassment by mortar fire or sniper shots at our military detachments or patrols, armed checkpoints, raids, and illegal occupations of some populated villages such as in Carmen, Cotabato. The MILF rebels, beginning January of 2000, made their attacks more severe, with the occupation of the town hall of Talayan, Maguindanao, which is a Muslim community, holding hundreds of civilian hostages. Moreover, the rebels set up roadblocks along portions of the national highway in Talayan, disrupting travel and commerce.

In March, the rebels occupied two towns in Lanao del Norte — Kauswagan and Munai — and blocked another national highway. The MILF occupied and conducted extortion activities in the Narciso Ramos Highway in Maguindanao, and thereby controlling municipal governments along that highway through force and intimidation. On May 13, 2000,

MILF rebels occupied one barangay in Esperanza, Sultan Kudarat, and held 150 persons hostage.

Any responsible and self-respecting government will not allow rebels to endanger the lives of hundreds of innocent people and overpower duly elected local civilian governments. Hence, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) launched operations to free these towns from the rebels, and protect the civilian population. While the government is committed to exhausting all peaceful and political means to address the conflict in Mindanao, we cannot close our eyes to the armed challenge of the rebels to the Constitutional order, or let the rebels continue victimizing our people through terrorism and other illegal actions. Accordingly, the government must take decisive action. Hence, the AFP pursued them up to their camps — which used to be the launching pads for MILF atrocities. The military actions were carried out, camp after camp, until ultimately, Camp Abubakar was overrun.

Reopening Peace Talks with the MILF

However, our approach to the MILF problem is not through the military solution alone, in fact, this was forced upon the government. Military action is only for that definite component of the MILF problem — the armed threat.

Even while hostilities were happening, the Government had initiated the reopening of peace negotiations with the MILF leadership who had withdrawn from the talks at the height of the conflict. In Kuala Lumpur where the MILF leadership led by the Political Vice-Chairman, Mr. Ghadzali Jaafar, was present, government representatives were sent to do back channelling with the MILF to come up with a possible interim agreement so that we could continue with the peace negotiation.

However, the June 30, 2000 deadline of the President lapsed. There was no agreement. But just the same, government is still committed to pursue the peace process to be able to conclude a political settlement with the MILF.

This indicates the government's resolve to settle the MILF problem, not through military solution alone, but through peaceful and political means as well.

The Strategy of Total Approach

The Strategy of Total Approach, which was adopted by government on September 29, 1999, serves as the overall strategy in dealing with insurgencies — whether of the communist-type or of the secessionist-type — as in the MILF problem. The strategy consists of a package of policies and programs that would effectively and simultaneously address the socio-economic, the political and the security aspects of the situation.

It is a strategy of total approach because the idea is that the military component of that approach will only be for establishing and maintaining law and order and stability; but, the major components of this "total approach" should be the socio-economic and political components.

The President's Four-Point Policy Framework

Hence, with respect to Mindanao, particularly the MILF problem, the Strategy of Total Approach, as applied, is embodied in the government's Four-Point Policy Framework to address the conflict, pursuant to the discussions in the National Security Council and the instructions of the President. These four points are the following:

1. The government's first aim is to restore and maintain peace in Mindanao, for without peace, development cannot proceed effectively; accordingly, the government shall assert and uphold its authority and solemn duty under the Constitution — to preserve our territorial integrity as one nation, maintain law and order, and protect the civilian population, through effective military and police actions against illegal acts, terrorism, and other forms of lawless violence perpetrated by the MILF and other rebel groups.

2. The government shall vigorously pursue reconstruction and socio-economic development in Mindanao particularly those affected by the armed conflict including those in former MILF area of influence, to immediately uplift the living conditions of our people, and in the long run, to enhance their social, economic, and cultural well-being.

As a matter of fact, before the intensive conflict between the government forces and the MILF, there were already plans for socio-

economic development and infrastructure projects allocated for Camp Abubakar and all other MILF areas.

3. Without prejudice to item 1, the government shall continue to pursue the peace talks/peace process with the MILF within the framework of the Constitution and the concept of meaningful autonomy.

4. The Government shall continue with the full and effective implementation of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement as a commitment and proof of our sincerity and goodwill to resolve the Mindanao problem politically, and likewise to serve as moral encouragement for the MILF to embrace autonomy.

It is very logical that we must do this. From a logical point-of-view, how could we convince the MILF to come to a peace agreement when we are not complying with that forged with the MNLF?

But the long-range reason why we should comply with the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement is because, ultimately, it is good for our people — the Muslim people and our people in Mindanao — and even for the whole country.

And so, as part of the political component of this Agenda, the government is offering a meaningful autonomy that can be allowed under the Philippine Constitution. Thus, we had exerted efforts to bring back the MILF to the negotiating table.

We had proposed to the MILF leadership the resumption of peace negotiations on July 29, 2000 and talk on substantive matters to settle the conflict politically. Towards this end, the President extended to the MILF Peace Panel members, advisers/consultants, and technical staffs the grant of Safety and Security Guarantee (SSG), or safe conduct pass, to facilitate the resumption of peace talks at the soonest possible time.

On the socio-economic agenda in Mindanao, substantial and focused development efforts are being undertaken in cities and provinces of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD), including MILF areas of influence. We have the social fund, we have infrastructures, we have also the social aspect of capability-building, which are all being undertaken

under the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement and also under the national program.

These projects and programs were however derailed by the financial constraints brought about by the economic crisis, and also by the armed conflict between the government and the MILF.

Conclusion

In closing, it is emphasized that while the government is committed to the peaceful and political solution to address the conflict in Mindanao, the government will continue to be vigilant; to do and perform its Constitutional duty of preserving law and order, to protect the people from lawless violence, and to ensure our territorial integrity.

The President's approval for the issuance of safe conduct passes for the MILF Peace Panel and other members, together with the continued backchanneling to persuade the MILF leadership to ultimately return to the negotiating table, are gestures that demonstrate the government's commitment to the peace process.

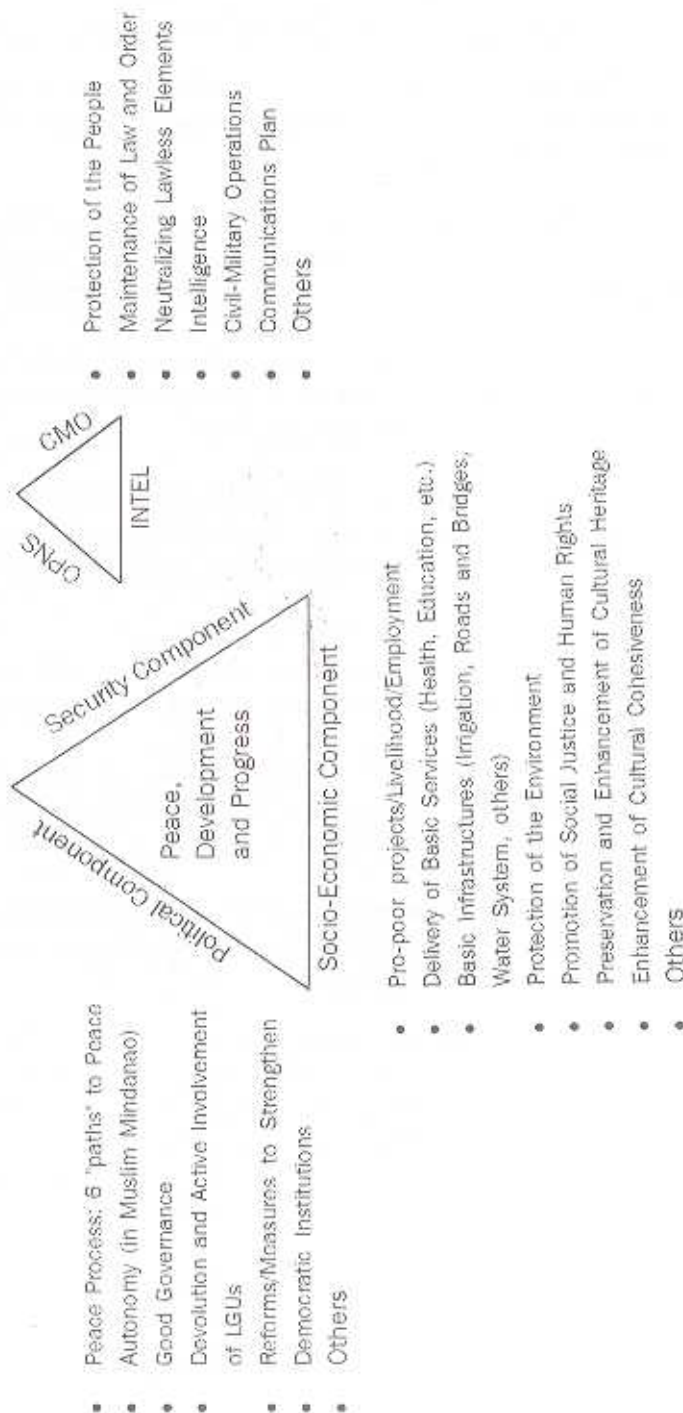
The government has offered a political package to the MILF that would enable them to participate in governance within an autonomy that our Constitution can allow, and therefore realize the Muslim Filipinos' quest for self-governance and self-determination within the framework of our Republic.

It is hoped that the MILF would accept this peaceful and political solution, not only for the greater good of the Muslim Filipinos, but also for the attainment of a just and lasting peace that would ensure the promotion of the full potentials of development in Southern Philippines. ♦

"Strategy of Total Approach": The Paradigm

The insurgency problem (whether of the communist or the secessionist type) has social, economic, political, and military dimensions. The military part, as manifested by armed guerilla activities, is the most visible sign or symptom of the problem. But the military arm acts only because of the political organization that provides it the leadership and the direction; on the other hand, the disaffection and grievances of the people obtaining within the socio-economic and political conditions in the area provide the insurgency movement the reason for its being. Thus, insurgency may not be solved by military solution alone (although military action is a vital and an important part), but by a package of government policies and programs that will effectively and simultaneously address the socio-economic, the political and military aspects of the situation. Accordingly, the whole government machinery and instrumentalities must strongly and coordinately be made to bear on the problem. Depicted below is the paradigm on how insurgency should be effectively addressed.

Government Strategic Framework In Addressing the Mindanao Problem and the Communist Insurgency



Six Paths to Peace

Government has pursued the comprehensive peace process along the "six paths to peace" in seeking a principled and peaceful resolution of armed conflicts. These are:

1. The pursuit of social, economic and political reforms. (Implementing "immediate doables" to address root causes of conflict, as evident in the formulation of the social reform agenda)
2. Consensus-building and empowerment for peace. (Continuing consultations to build consensus on the peace and reform agenda, through sustained networking of partners)
3. Peaceful negotiated settlement with the different rebel groups. (Working negotiated settlements, either at the national or local level, with military rebels, Philippines Autonomous Groups and the Communist insurgents)
4. Programs for reconciliation, reintegration and rehabilitation. (Restoring the lives of former rebels, combatants and civilian victims)
5. Conflict management and protection of civilians caught in armed conflict (Ensuring the welfare and protection of civilians and to reduce the impact of the conflicts on them)
6. Building and nurturing a climate conducive to peace. (Establishing and maintaining peace education, advocacy programs and dialogue processes across the country)