

On Peace and Insurgency: President Estrada and the Conflict in Mindanao

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More than the average politician, renegade soldier-turned lawmaker Senator Gregorio Honasan understands President Joseph Estrada's order to use force against the Moro International Liberation Front (MILF) rebels. He believes the Estrada government had very little choice as the presence of the MILF secessionist camps in Mindanao was an affront to national sovereignty that no self-respecting government would have tolerated. Honasan stresses that the conflict, which has inflicted upon the nation billions in losses and an incalculable cost of human lives, must end and that the present administration has an opportunity to do so soon. Once the Mindanao conflict is resolved, the region may finally catch up with the rest of the country through Senator Honasan's proposed Mindanao Initiative. Patterned after the Marshall Plan of 1947, the proposed legislation would provide for the rebuilding of the Muslim communities long neglected by the central government. The Plan aims to provide emergency relief assistance, rehabilitate damaged social infrastructure and accelerate the implementation of development programs. Also among its goals are the increased transfer of real resources to Mindanao and the closer monitoring of government projects in Mindanao. Aside from the implementation of the Plan, there is also an urgent need for a stronger political representation for Muslims in Manila. Meanwhile, the government and the MILF should refrain from imposing deadlines and ultimatums and instead find patience in the slow moving path toward peace.

I am greatly pleased and deeply honored to be asked to speak before this forum organized by the Third World Studies Center of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Even I have heard of the quality of the scholarship generated here on the political, economic and social concerns of our country. I also know it is not ivory-tower philosophers this Center produces but intellectuals *engaged* intimately in our country's travails.

In my public life, I too have tried to combine thought and action. And every time I fall away from the ideal, my admiration grows all the more for those who are able to do so with grace and dignity. Let me now try and fulfill my mission here — to speak on the Estrada administration and the conflict in Mindanao.

President Estrada Had No Choice But to Order the Use of Force

How did this renewed outbreak of fighting begin? Like every other conflict, its origins are clouded in controversy. But on the issue of the use of force against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels, I would agree that the Estrada government had no choice. Ultimately, the President had to order out the armed forces in the face of successive provocations from the MILF. The presence of the MILF's secessionist camps was by itself an affront to national sovereignty that no self-respecting government would have for long tolerated.

As you know, the MILF — which started out as a breakaway Islamic faction of the more secularist MNLF — did not take active part in the Jakarta peace talks. But it did take advantage of the truce to recruit troops, build up its armaments, and consolidate territory. As a result, from 1996 until 1999 the MNLF was able to build up its armed strength from about 8,000 to 15,600 men. Eventually, it controlled 45 military camps scattered throughout Western Mindanao. These camps — Camp Abubakar being the largest of them — became veritable independent enclaves, where the national flag did not fly; and where extremist, eye-for-an-eye Islamist law was enforced.

MILF Violations of the 1996 Truce

Between the 1997 ceasefire and the outbreak of fighting in April, government counted 227 separate MILF violations of the truce. Sometime in March this year, MILF forces started to occupy small municipalities adjacent to their camps. And in April, they set up checkpoints along the strategic Narciso Ramos Highway strangling regional commerce throughout Western Mindanao. What is worse, the situation became complicated by the taking of civilian hostages by the MILF and the kidnapping of both Filipino and foreigners by its Abu Sayyaf gang in Basilan.

In his State-of-the-Nation Address before Congress last Monday (July 24, 2000), President Estrada spoke of his agonizing decision to order the use of force against the MILF. "I could not just stand by," he told the assembled lawmakers, "while the rebels ate up more and more of the country's territory...When I took office, I swore to preserve and defend the Constitution. And it was my solemn duty under that Constitution to repel the armed rebellion and to defend the sovereignty and integrity of the Republic."

Time to Break Away from the the Vicious Cycle of Ceasefire/ Violation/Offensive/Ceasefire

Now the MILF camps have all folded up. In what were once MILF enclaves — the Republic's writ once again prevails. And as the fighting has died down, well-meaning people — Christians as well as Muslims — have begun to call for another ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table. On this issue of a ceasefire, let me interject a personal observation. I had extensive — and *painful* — experience of the fighting against the MNLF in the 1970s immediately after my graduation from the Philippine Military Academy Class '71. Let me emphasize this: To a soldier, a ceasefire is always welcome — but a *ceasefire never lasts*.

For a full generation, this country has sought peace in Mindanao — but has not found it. From the PMA alone, 30 successive classes have all paid their dues — in blood, sweat, and tears — to the Mindanao conflict. So I would say it is time we had broken away from what has become the vicious Mindanao cycle of ceasefire/violation/offensive/ceasefire. We must try and deal with our Mindanao problem once and for all. And I think this juncture is as good a time as any.

The Future of the Mindanao Conflict : We Have a Good Chance to End the Fighting

Is the conflict likely to continue with the liability of guerrilla fighting and terrorism breaking out in other parts of Mindanao and even in Metro Manila as some analysts predict? I believe that — thanks to the *resolute spirit* of this Presidency — we have a good chance of ending the fighting for good and of arriving at a just settlement of our Muslim community's historic grievances in Mindanao. The best sign of this possibility is that the two sides are still talking. It is good the two sides are still in direct touch. Both sides know and appreciate the costs, in lives and treasure, that protracted fighting will extract.

We in Luzon cannot appreciate the hunger for peace that animates the peoples of Mindanao. We in Luzon are *not* generally aware that from 1970 when the separatist rebellion began until the peace agreement of 1996, the Mindanao conflict has cost more than P73 billion and taken more than 100,000 lives and wounded 55,000 other people — 30% of

them our soldiers, more than 50% of them rebels, and some 20% civilians caught in the crossfire.

The Conflict Will Wreak Havoc on our Budget

As for the Estrada government, I can tell you it knows full well the potential consequences of the protracted conflict in Mindanao. The consequence of the conflict that is the most easily predictable is its destructive effect on our country's effort to recover from the East Asian financial crisis. At the very least, the conflict will *bloat* our budget deficit — raising prices and interest rates, devaluing the peso, and making life generally more difficult for all our people.

For instance in May — the month of the fiercest fighting — the budget deficit apparently ballooned to P20.8 billion from the targeted P11.2 billion. I do *not* think the Bumbaran and Balabagan massacres in Lanao del Sur — in which a total of 33 civilians were killed — are likely to become organic parts of the MILF's overall strategy. So far, both sides have been *restrained* in their military activities (although their rhetoric may be something else).

Military operations these past four months have *not* degraded the main force of the MILF, which has just as wisely refused to contest the physical possession of Camp Abubakar. But the capture of the MILF's 45 camps denies the MILF the secure bases from which to launch its attacks. Capture of the camps has also broken up the MILF's command, control, communications and intelligence network — the brains and the nerve-center to any military organization. From now on, coordinating strategies will be vastly more difficult for the scattered MILF forces. The MILF will also now find it vastly more difficult to build up its manpower resources — and its supplies of war material, as well as the food, medicine, and clothing its fighters will need constantly.

Separatism Has No Future

At the geopolitical level, I am also certain the MILF has realized that separatism — on whatever ground — has no future in the Third World today. Rather than a harbinger of the future, East Timor is the exception that proves the rule. Separatism in Aceh, Fattani, Kashmir, Jaffna and

Mindanao cannot succeed because the states in which these regions belong will sacrifice everything to preserve their territorial integrity.

That, too, was the message the Islamic countries sent out from the Kuala Lumpur gathering of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This is why I am *not* as pessimistic about Mindanao as some of us undoubtedly are. I think we can foresee an end to the fighting and the expansion of the time and space we need to develop the whole of Mindanao.

Mindanao's Urgent Needs Call for a Concerted and Coordinated Effort

Mindanao's needs today are far greater than they were before the resurgence of the conflict. The island's further deterioration — in economic, social and political terms — could be averted only if there is concerted and coordinated effort from all of us who care about its people.

As government comes closer to attaining its limited military objectives against the MILF, government must speed up production of its recovery and development blueprint. I assure you the groundwork for this program has begun. A Cabinet Cluster for Mindanao was created sometime ago. And it has a private sector counterpart made up of representatives of Mindanao civil society that include Mindanao-based business groups, NGOs, local officials and Muslim leaders.

To help him speed up his plans for developing our southern main island, President Estrada last Monday (July 2000) asked Congress to pass the bill amending the Organic Act, the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and another bill granting him special powers to fast-track the development of the island.

The Mindanao Initiative — My Proposal for a Mini-Marshall Plan for the South

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Peace, Unification, and Reconciliation, I have devoted a lot of study and thought in recent months to the problem of enabling our underdeveloped South to catch up with the rest of the country. To my colleagues in the Senate, I have now proposed a Mindanao Initiative — built around a mini-Marshall Plan for the region.

The Marshall Plan of 1947, formally known as the ERP (European Recovery Program), was designed to restore 16 European states to economic, political, and social health after the devastation of World War II. Under the ERP, the Americans donated \$12.5 billion to Western Europe over the period 1948-52 to cover budget deficits incurred in the process of continental reconstruction.

For Mindanao, our mini-Marshall Plan would have the same general objective. It would provide for the "catch-up" financing our Muslim communities need to make up for the long years of neglect from the central government in Manila. I envision this investment money to be in addition to Mindanao's normal share of national revenues. And these funds should go *directly* to social services — particularly primary health care, basic education, and university scholarships — and infrastructure investment.

Where will the money come from? From where would it be sourced? I envision the Plan being financed through "Mindanao Development Bonds" that our donor countries — principally Japan and the United States — and the Islamic oil-states could subscribe to, and which can also be marketed to Filipinos both here and abroad. What will the Mini-Marshall Plan try to accomplish in specific terms? Among its basic goals are the following:

1. Provision of emergency relief assistance;
2. Rehabilitation of damaged social infrastructure — schools, highways and roads — farms, homes and local commerce;
3. Accelerated implementation of development programs;
4. Increased transfer of real resources to Mindanao through additional budget support; and
5. Closer monitoring of Government resources and projects in Mindanao, to ensure their cost-effectiveness.

Stronger Political Representation for Muslims in Manila

By stimulating economic activity — entrepreneurship and small- and medium-enterprises in Muslim Mindanao, our Mindanao Initiative could position Mindanao to take full advantage of the promise of the East ASEAN Economic Grouping that the Philippines through President Ramos had done so much to start off. Through its East ASEAN initiative, the

Ramos Administration opened Mindanao and Sulu as the country's "front door" to trade and investment in the Borneo-Celebes-Moluccas region, which had in the 18th and 19th centuries all been part of a great maritime trading zone mediated by the Sulu Sultanate.

Another urgent need of our Muslim communities is stronger political representation in the Central Government in Manila — particularly in the Senate and in the Cabinet-level departments. Perhaps this could be arranged through some kind of proportional representation appropriate to their number.

Let Us Not Set Deadlines and Ultimatums for One Another

There are many other things that could be part of a concerted national effort to find a lasting solution to our Mindanao problem. And fora like this one are good venues for discussing these problems and their possible solutions in the spirit of openness and cooperation. What is certain is that there are no easy solutions, no quick fixes for the problems the national community faces. There is no substitute for all our leaders coming together — in the words of the prophet Isaiah — "to sit down and reason together."

Meanwhile, let us not set deadlines and ultimatums for one another. Specifically, I would ask Governor Nur Misuari for a little more patience and forbearance. As you know, Nur has imposed on the Estrada Administration a 'deadline' of November 2000 to comply satisfactorily with the GRP-MNLF peace agreement. If government fails to do so, our friend Nur has threatened to appeal to the Summit Meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference or to the International Court of Justice. These deadlines and ultimatums fulfill no useful purpose.

I realize the Bangsamoro people who believe in Governor Misuari's leadership have long awaited peace and autonomy and that the Government of the Republic has not complied fully with its commitments. This is why I have proposed to the Estrada administration the forming of a joint executive-legislative committee to review the unfulfilled provisions of the 1996 Jakarta Agreement.

What Can You Do Here at the University of the Philippines?

What can you as university students do? You must speak out — logically and clearly — your collective thoughts on our Mindanao problem. This is a problem in which every insight — every bit of wisdom and compassion — is useful. This University, I know, has had an impact on what is taking place in Mindanao — by the fact that it helped to educate the young people who are deeply involved in the situation there.

I am also aware of this University's contribution to Islamic scholarship in our country — starting with the well-known Dr. Cesar Majul. For the young people here at the University, this country expects intellectual, political and moral leadership in its effort to unite all our people under one flag, one spirit, and one nation.●