

Mindanao, Philippines

The stated commitments to restarting peace negotiations between the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government of the Republic of the Philippines boosted the prospect of peace in the first half of 2007. However, those hopes were dashed by intense fighting between the two parties throughout the year. Faced with these realities, the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) worked to achieve its mandated goals, but as the situation deteriorated further during the year, the mission was watching an all-out war and a diplomatic stalemate rather than the cease-fire and active peace process that it was mandated to facilitate.

The 1996 peace agreement signed by the secular-nationalist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the government established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The agreement failed to address demands of the radical MILF branch of the MNLF, which desires an independent Muslim state. After several failed attempts at negotiations, the parties resumed peace talks, brokered by Malaysia on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in 2004. In mid-2004 the MILF agreed to cooperate with the government's armed forces against the Al-Qaida-connected Jemaah Islamiah network and other terrorist elements, while the government dropped its criminal charges against MILF personnel over alleged bombings in 2003. By September 2004, the parties had agreed to the creation of the IMT. In November, fifty Malaysians and ten Bruneians were deployed to monitor the cease-fire and develop mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.

IMT contingents wear official military uniforms, bear no weapons, and are escorted by security personnel from the government or

International Monitoring Team (IMT)

• Authorization Date	22 June 2001 (Tripoli Peace Agreement)
• Start Date	October 2004
• Head of Mission	Major-General Datuk Mat Yasin bin Mat Daud (Malaysia)
• Strength as of 30 September 2007	Military Observers: 60

the MILF. The monitors are paid by their respective governments, while the government of the Philippines covers their operational costs. Since its initial deployment, the IMT's mandate has been extended annually at the request of the MILF and the government of the Philippines.

After talks broke down on substantive issues of resource management and territory delineation during 2006, both the MILF and the government expressed their willingness to resume peace talks, with proposals for limited Mindanao autonomy as their centerpiece in early 2007. The scheduled talks were postponed several times throughout the year amid persistent violence, and were finally put off indefinitely following the MILF's massacre of fourteen government marines and the subsequent resumption of full-scale hostilities during August. In response to the MILF's attacks and suspicions of the presence of extremist terrorist group Abu Sayyaf on the island, Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo announced a full-scale military offensive in Mindanao and redeployed Philippine military headquarters to the region. The ensuing clashes were reported to have led to many casualties and to have displaced over 20,000 residents.

While the IMT presence did little to limit the escalation in violence throughout the year, both the government and the MILF agreed to extend the mission's mandate until August 2008. However, with both sides to the conflict

increasingly pursuing military options in the face of diplomatic stalemate, the IMT's impact will remain limited until the parties demonstrate the willingness to pursue a political settlement to the conflict.