

## Mindanao, Philippines

During 2005, the Moro Insurgency in the southern Philippines and the central government in Manila moved closer to resolving their three-decade conflict, due in part to the engagement of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) deployed to Mindanao in November 2004. Progress toward resolution has been bolstered by a military stalemate reached during the past year, and by political transition within the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) due to the death of its chairman, Hashim Salamat, in July 2003. Additionally, the Philippine central government's mounting concern that the war zone has become a haven for terrorists, the financial burden of its continued military campaign, and the MILF's worries that the United States might expand its military role in the south have encouraged both parties to return to the negotiating table.

In 1996, the secular nationalist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a peace agreement with the Manila government under which the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was established as an

initial step toward Moro self-government. Despite this progress, however, the more radical Moro Islamic Liberation Front continued its armed struggle for the establishment of an independent Muslim state. The Philippine government and the MILF first forged a cease-fire pact in 1998, but the agreement collapsed when then-president Joseph Estrada ordered a full assault against the rebel groups' headquarters and camp in Mindanao. In 2001, Malaysia hosted a renewed effort to come to a peaceful agreement. These efforts similarly collapsed in February 2003 when clashes on the ground flared up over allegations that the MILF was building its strength and providing safe haven for alleged terrorists.

In February 2004, a significant breakthrough occurred when Manila and the MILF agreed to resume peace talks brokered by Malaysia on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In July 2004, the MILF agreed to cooperate with the Philippine armed forces against Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the mainly Indonesian-based, pan-Southeast Asian terrorist network with alleged ties to Al-Qaida and to kidnapping gangs that were believed to have found sanctuary in rebel-controlled areas. In return for this collaboration, Manila dropped its criminal charges against MILF personnel over alleged bombings carried out in 2003.

In an environment in which both sides were making concessions and the cease-fire was generally holding, the IMT was given a one-year mandate. The sixty-member team is composed of fifty Malaysian military observers, ten Bruneians, and four Libyans. IMT

### International Monitoring Team (IMT)

- Authorization and start date November 2004
- Head of mission Major-General Dato 'Zulkifeli bin Mohd Zin (Malaysia)
- Budget as of 30 September 2005 \$2.7 million (2005)
- Strength as of 30 September 2005 Military observers: 64

members are sponsored by their respective governments, although operational costs are borne by the Philippine government. The team members wear their official military uniform but do not carry any firearms in the conduct of their mission. Based in Cotabato City, the IMT has satellite offices in locations with heavy MILF concentrations. Agreed between the MILF and the Philippine government in Manila, the IMT's terms of reference are to monitor the cessation of hostilities, and to ensure that the peace process progresses to a stage in which the conflict-affected areas can be rehabilitated, reconstructed, and redeveloped.

The IMT's presence helps to create conditions conducive to peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government. While the parties to the conflict have set up mechanisms for cooperating with the IMT and ensuring its freedom of movement, the monitors are escorted by security from the Philippine government and the MILF at all times.

Throughout 2004, the MILF and the Philippine government accused each other of committing cease-fire violations, and continued to mount attacks against army outposts and rebel-controlled territory respectively. In April 2005 they were able to return to the negotiating table in Port Dickson, Malaysia. Following three days of negotiations, Manila and the MILF agreed that a "breakthrough" had been achieved on key issues relating to Moro peoples' ancestral homeland. Although they were able to reach broad consensus on a number of issues, the most crucial and difficult elements were tabled for discussion at the June 2005

round of talks. These included matters that go beyond the 1996 agreement with the MNLF, such as Moro aspirations for political self-determination.

A meeting in April 2005, which brought together senior figures from the MILF and MNLF may constitute a step toward solidifying their 2001 "unity agreement." The need to build a common political platform is imperative to addressing the continued allegations that, although MILF leaders are engaged in peace negotiations and deny any ties to JI, local commanders have operational and training links with the organization. A political format that provides greater autonomy and builds on the steps already taken toward regional self-management could not only form the basis for a political solution, but also reduce the climate of lawlessness.

At the end of October, an environment of optimism prevailed, with the head of the Philippine government negotiating panel, Silvestre Afable, stating that he was hopeful an agreement could be signed within the first six months of 2006. He added that the government had agreed in principle to share revenues from ancestral lands in Mindanao with the MILF as part of a proposed peace agreement, and that the government was considering offering federal state status for MILF territories or Muslim-dominated areas in Mindanao. In early November, the MILF dismantled a newly built camp, in compliance with the IMT's earlier ruling that the construction was in violation of a 2003 agreement signed by both sides.