

Mindanao, Philippines

Negotiations between the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government of the Republic of the Philippines continued throughout the first half of 2006. However, progress toward a comprehensive peace agreement for Mindanao was stymied by the resumption of large-scale fighting between the two parties. The Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) struggled to fulfill its cease-fire monitoring mission in the context of limited movement toward a political settlement.

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), but did not address the demands of the more radical MILF branch of the MNLF, which sought the establishment of 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 (OIC), in 2004. In mid-2004 the MILF agreed to cooperate with the government armed forces against the Al-Qaida-connected Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) 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 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. In December 2004, four Libyan personnel joined the IMT in its headquarters and satellite offices throughout Mindanao.

IMT contingents wear official military uniforms, carry no weapons and are escorted

by security from the government or the MILF. Peacekeepers 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 government. In 2006, both factions lauded the IMT's work, and requested it be expanded to include other nations. Japanese and Swedish monitors were added to the IMT in July and September. In October Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo requested an extension of the IMT, citing its centrality to the peace process.

Between the deployment of the IMT in late 2004 and mid-2006, cease-fire violations in the contested territory decreased by 90 percent, and the mission played an instrumental role in maintaining a relatively calm environment. In January 2006 intra-MILF clan fighting in the province of Maguindanao elicited a military response from government forces, resulting in several skirmishes and the death of two civilians. The IMT's head, Major-General Soheimi Abbas, immediately visited the site and initiated steps to put an end to the confrontation. Similarly, in February, the IMT neutralized a potentially violent standoff between 200 heavily armed government marines and MILF forces.

By the start of 2006, negotiations between government and the MILF had made progress in defining the concept of territory and governance relating to Moro peoples' ancestral homelands, but the parties failed to reach agreement on issues like the delineation of territory and resource management. The breakdown of negotiations in May 2006 precipitated

a deterioration in the security situation. The IMT presence did little to limit the violence, and the increasing cease-fire violations by both sides resulted in the displacement of 20,000.

Despite this continued tension, in mid-November the government put forward a settlement offer in the hope of bringing MILF back to negotiations. Also, both parties requested that the United States take an active role. The peace process is scheduled to resume in early 2007, but the political stalemate and deteriorating security suggest that a solution will not be easy to find.

International Monitoring Team (IMT)

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| • Authorization date | 22 June 2001 (Tripoli Peace Agreement) |
| • Start date | November 2004 |
| • Head of mission | Major-General Ismael bin Ahmad Khan (Malaysia) |
| • Strength as of
30 September 2006 | Military observers: 54
Civilian staff: 2 |