

Mindanao

International Monitoring Team (IMT)

• Authorization Date	22 June 2001
• Start Date	October 2004
• Head of Mission	Dato' Pahlawan Amzah bin Sulaiman (Malaysia)
• Strength as of 30 September 2008	Military Observers: 30

A draft agreement concluded between the government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in July 2008 on the creation of a Muslim homeland fostered hope that an end to three decades of conflict on the island of Mindanao might be within reach. However, the prospects for long-term peace were dashed when the agreement was rejected by the Supreme Court of the Philippines. As a new round of fighting escalated, both sides recognized that the 2003 cease-fire agreement was no longer in effect, leaving the International Monitoring Team (IMT) without a mandated role.

The 1996 peace agreement signed by the secular-nationalist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine government established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), but the agreement failed to address the demands of the radical MILF branch of the MNLF, whose aim is for 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 Jemaah

Islamiah, a network connected to Al-Qaeda, as well as against other terrorist elements, while the government dropped its criminal charges against MILF personnel over alleged bombings in 2003. In September 2004, the parties agreed to the creation of the IMT to oversee the cease-fire and act as a neutral investigator of violations.

The IMT's observers wear official military uniforms, bear no weapons, and are escorted by government or MILF security forces. The monitors are paid by their respective governments and come mainly from Brunei and Malaysia. Since the IMT's initial deployment, its mandate has been extended annually at the request of the MILF and the government.

After talks broke down during 2006, both the MILF and the Philippine government expressed their willingness to resume negotiations regarding the issue of limited autonomy for Mindanao, though the resumption of negotiations was postponed several times throughout 2007 in the face of escalating violence. However, preparations continued behind the scenes. Talks resumed from March to July 2008, concluding in the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, which acknowledged the Muslims of Mindanao, the Bangsamoro, as a "first nation" and laid the groundwork for the establishment of a homeland for them, a key MILF demand. The signing of the memorandum had been scheduled for 5 August 2008, but under pressure from local officials who maintained that they had not been consulted, and facing widespread opposition from the largely Roman Catholic Philippine population, the Supreme Court of the Philippines issued a temporary restraining order preventing its signing. This injunction led to intense fighting between MILF and government forces that, by mid-October, resulted in the displacement of

nearly 400,000 Filipinos. On 14 October, the Supreme Court ruled that that the memorandum was unconstitutional, a major blow to what was left of the peace process.

While the IMT threatened to withdraw, its mandate was extended for three months, until 30 November 2008, following the Supreme Court's injunction in August and the subsequent

spike in violence. Operationally constrained by the violent developments of the year, and with only a formal request from the Philippine government for IMT to remain, the mission withdrew its remaining observers at the end of the year, promising to return if and when the parties re-engage in the cease-fire agreement.