

It's a Miracle They're Still Talking! The Saga of the GRP-MILF Peace Talks

B. R. RODIL

Abstract

During the fifteen months of peace negotiations from January 1997, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had its agreements and disagreements.


The agreements were threefold:

- *January 27, 1997, initial accord on a six-point temporary truce applicable only in Buldon, Maguindanao.*
- *September 12, 1997, agreement on the ground rules of the general cessation of hostilities.*
- *On November 14, 1997, the signing of the cease-fire agreement that, among other things, classifies kidnapping, summary executions, ambushes and bombings as "provocative and hostile acts."*

The disagreements are armed encounters that punctuated the periods between the agreements. The peace negotiation is still holding. It is indeed a miracle that they are still talking. As of this writing, they have yet to agree on the main agenda for the talks.

Monitoring the GRP-MILF peace talks is like seeing a good movie with a very complex plot and numerous sub-plots woven into each other. One is never able to tell the rise and fall of the story or what the ending of each sub-plot will be.

But looking back, after almost fifteen months of "viewing from the sidelines",

 B.R. RODIL, a professor of History, Department of History, College of Arts & Social Sciences at MSU-IIT, has an MA Kasaysayan from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. He has written numerous works on Lumad and Moro history and contemporary affairs.

one is finally able to identify the highlights of the story, even if the final ending is yet to come.

Highlights and Gains of the Talks

Judging from the standpoint that points of consensus are success stories then the following events should constitute the highpoints of the peace negotiation:

1. January 27, 1997 - initial accord signed at the Dawah Center, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao on a six point temporary truce applicable only in Buldon.
 - a) Buldon Mayor Macarampat Manalao shall be installed in office by Maguindanao Gov. Zacaria Candao.
 - b) Buldon-based militiamen and police shall provide security to the mayor and maintain law enforcement in the area.
 - c) The MILF shall not put up checkpoints along the highway or major roads leading to Buldon.
 - d) MILF and military forces shall refrain from provocative actions like strafing, shelling, bombing and troop movements.
 - e) Soldiers deployed in Buldon after January 1 shall be pulled out later based on the evaluation of military leadership; and
 - f) Troops and rebels now deployed in Buldon shall remain "as is, where is" until their proper places of assignment shall have been determined.
2. As a result of the bombing of a Madrasah in Buldon on March 16 which resulted in the death of 10 young students and their teacher, as well as to monitor the local truce, an Interim Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (ICMC) was formed by the GRP-MILF panels to be headed by Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI, President of Notre Dame University.
3. On April 17, the MILF announced its agreement to proceed with the meeting which was re-scheduled for April 23-24 at the same venue. They also accepted the inclusion of GRP-proposed "general cessation of hostilities" in the discussion. The meeting will also review the interim truce in Buldon and the "final positioning" of soldiers and rebels in the embattled town. It should be recalled that the localized truce mandated "as-

is, where-is positions" for the warring forces, an arrangement both MILF and government officials described as unfavorable and the cause of several violations of the ceasefire.

4. On July 18, 1997, the two panels agreed at Cagayan de Oro City to:
 - commit the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the MILF to a general cessation of hostilities.
 - direct their respective sub-committee on cessation of hostilities to meet on July 30 and on such dates thereafter but not to exceed two months, to draw and finalize the guidelines and ground rules for the implementation of the agreement.
 - resume and proceed with the formal peace talks in a venue to be mutually agreed upon between the panels.
5. September 12, 1997, the two parties agreed on the ground rules of the general cessation of hostilities. This contained six items:
 - a) Organization of a committee that will be responsible for the implementation of the general truce.
 - b) Setting up of the committee's secretariat.
 - c) Formation of an independent fact-finding committee that superseded the previous Interim Ceasefire Monitoring Group.
 - d) Scope of the ceasefire pact.
 - e) The committee's administrative office.
 - f) Joint dissemination of information on the truce agreement.
6. On November 14, 1997 the signing of the ceasefire agreement, that, among other things, classifies kidnapping, summary executions, ambushes and bombings as "provocative and hostile acts."

Logic Goes Not in Straight Lines

Certain human angles do not seem to fit but they form an integral part of the story. These took place at the time when the two parties were engaged in a combination of heavy and light fighting from Central Mindanao to western Mindanao to Basilan. They were also still arguing over where the venue of the first meeting

should be:

1. In the first week of December 1996, the Dawah center in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, about 500 meters from the provincial capitol, hosted a huge assembly, possibly the biggest ever in Mindanao in recent history, of hundreds of thousands of Muslims, some claim a million, for a three-day Bangsamoro People's Assembly. Organized by the Central Mindanao's Ulama-Professional Executive Committee, its output was described as the Muslim consensus on the so-called Mindanao problem, embodied in 20 resolutions, each seeking the establishment of an independent Islamic state. The output formed a fundamental part of their official MILF stand in the negotiations, yet its leadership denied any role in the organization of the assembly.
2. On Christmas eve, December 1996, the MILF successfully facilitated the release of a kidnapped victim, Carey Biangco, 11, and turned him over to his parents in Datu Piang, Maguindanao. Al Haj Murad, MILF Vice Chair for Military Affairs, said over radio station DXMS: "We have facilitated his release as part of our confidence-building measures with the government for the talks." The boy was kidnapped on December 9, 1996.
3. Shortly after Christmas, 1996, in a simple ceremony at Camp Abubakar in Matanog, Maguindanao, the main base of the MILF, Hadji Murad thanked Agrarian Reform Secretary Ernesto Garilao for awarding 8,375 hectares of lands to some 1,960 Muslim farmer-beneficiaries. Both officials agreed, with or without ceasefire and/or peace talks, to continue the distribution of lands to Muslim farmers, who were displaced by fighting in Mindanao. Murad was quoted as believing in the government sincerity in alleviating poverty through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program.

More armed clashes took place between the first meeting on January 7, 1997 and the signing of the localized Buldon truce, then after that until the inking of the July 18 agreement on the general cessation of hostilities, accentuated by the heavy fighting for about three weeks in the Pikit-Pagalungan-Carmen-Kabacan area, resulting in the death of some 146 MILF guerrillas and 12 military troopers and the displacement of more than 50,000 civilian evacuees, yet statements of willingness to continue the talks were noted on both sides by the media. Perhaps it was the pressure of war and the openness to talk peace that brought them back to the negotiating table and agree on the general cessation of hostilities.

Government Development Projects in Rebel Territory

It should be mentioned that Gov Nur Misuari was called upon by President Ramos early in July to initiate contact with the MILF leadership; he sat with them for three hours. Speaker Jose de Venecia, Jr. did his spadework by paying a surprise visit to Camp Abubakar of the MILF in Matanog on July 27. Later, on November 29, he would return to the same for the inauguration or groundbreaking of some projects inside Camp Abubakar as he earlier committed to Hadji Murad on July 29 when they first met. These were:

- a) The completion of the P500,000 first solar power water pump in Mindanao, built inside Camp Abubakar for drinking water and to support the mosque;
- b) The completion of the 50-hectare irrigation in Barangay Lankong, Matanog, inside Camp Abubakar;
- c) The groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies for the P30-million irrigation system for 2,000 hectares, including the completion of the first 50 hectares, in Camp Abubakar; and
- d) The groundbreaking ceremonies for the nine-kilometer mountain road from the national highway to the heartland of Camp Abubakar.

Shoot and Talk

They started by shooting. That was mid-October 1996. Then they talked. Then they went back to shooting. Then they talked again. It is now January 1998. They are still shooting. And still talking. This in itself a miracle.

On October 15, 1996, a month and a half after the signing of the peace agreement between the GRP and the MNLF, 200 rebels from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) attacked an Army detachment in Carmen town in North Cotabato. Twelve people died in the fighting, no one reportedly from the government side, and 4,500 villagers fled from their homes. Towards the end of the month, as part of week long skirmishes between the military and the MILF, two military helicopters fired rockets at an MILF position at a remote village in Tipo-Tipo town in Basilan. Two days earlier two Army battalions under the 103rd Brigade headed by Col. Antonio Santos overran Camp Kontikky, the MILF main camp in sitio Badja Maluha, Tipo-Tipo. Government troopers found the bodies

of five MILF rebels at the camp.

At the same time that these were happening, they were also expressing hopes of starting the peace talks between them in the same month.

On October 19 the MILF did receive a proposal of a truce from the government through Executive Secretary Ruben Torres. As early as the first week of October, the government had already formed its negotiating panel and technical committees, one to handle the agenda of the talks, the other to handle the terms of the cease fire.

As part of its confidence building measures, said MILF spokesman Ghadzali Jaafar, the MILF has issued a communique to its field commanders in the first week of November to capture, prosecute, and execute by firing squad kidnapers and drug traffickers who will be caught operating within MILF-controlled territories in the South.

Still in the first week of November, eight Army soldiers were killed and 10 others were wounded when elements of the 5th Infantry Battalion figured in another bloody encounter in the ongoing military operations against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels at Tipo-Tipo, Basilan.

Entering into the second week of November, at Siocon in Zamboanga del Norte, not too far away from Basilan, a Philippine Army junior officer, a sergeant, and three para-military members were killed when heavily armed Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) elements attacked their detachment in barangay Latabon, Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte.

Into the fourth week of November, three persons, including a government trooper, were killed while two others were wounded as Philippine Marines and members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continued to clash in Basilan. In Cotabato City, a team of MILF raided and destroyed a police detachment which was under construction at the boundary of Rio Grande and Panatakan towns. The rebels were aboard pumpboats.

In the first week of December, at the Dawah center in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, about 500 meters from the provincial capitol, a huge congregation, possibly the biggest assembly witnessed in Mindanao in recent history, hundreds of thousands of Muslims gathered for a three-day Bangsamoro People's Assembly. Organized by Central Mindanao's Ulama-Professional Executive Committee, the assembly forged what was dubbed as the Muslim consensus on the so-called Mindanao problem, embodied in 20 resolutions, each seeking the establishment of an independent Islamic state. The MILF leaders denied that they were behind the assembly.

In the second week of December, the government unilaterally declared a 60-day ceasefire. Government negotiators said they would take advantage of the 60-day Christmas ceasefire by initiating a dialogue with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to settle the date and venue of peace negotiations. For their part, the MILF urged Malacañang to course through Executive Secretary Ruben Torres all its communication to the rebel group to maintain a "direct line" that would "ensure the sensible exchange of ideas regarding the talks." Meanwhile, Amb. Fortunato Abat, chair of the Government negotiating panel stressed in a radio interview that the government position would be framed within the Philippine Constitution.

As of mid-December, both sides could not agree on the venue of the technical committee meeting; they were to discuss the rules of the ceasefire. The government side would be led by Brig. Gen. Joselin Nazareno for the government and lawyer Lanang Ali for the MILF. The MILF wanted it at Camp Abubakar in Matanog, Maguindanao; the Government panel wanted it in Cagayan de Oro City on December 17-19, 1996.

Aside from the venue, they also could not agree on the frame of reference on the talks, the terms and conditions of a proposed ceasefire. The government panel insisted on having the 1987 Constitution as frame of reference of the talks. The MILF said the 1976 Tripoli Agreement should be the basis for the talks. In addition, it said it would also be guided by the recommendations of the People's Consultative Assembly in Sultan Kudarat.

The day after Christmas, Al Haj Murad, MILF vice chair for military affairs, warned that peace talks will bog down if the government fails to pull out military troops in Basilan. He added that ground rules must be set in order to ensure the observance of the ceasefire itself. One such ground rule is the government recognition of areas controlled by the MILF. He further stated said that the MILF has armed troops numbering between 120,000 to 130,000. These armed troops were manning at least 13 camps, including the Camp Abubakar, all over Mindanao. Outside the camps MILF armed troops in a squad formation were also deployed in each barangay.

Meanwhile, in a simple ceremony at Camp Abubakar, Murad thanked Agrarian Reform Secretary Ernesto Garilao for awarding 8,375 hectares of lands to some 1,960 Muslim farmer-beneficiaries. Both officials agreed, with or without ceasefire or and peace talks, to continue the distribution of lands to Muslim farmers, who were displaced by fighting in Mindanao. Murad was quoted as believing in the government sincerity in alleviating poverty through the Comprehensive Agrar-

ian Reform Program. Murad said the MILF views the government as sincere in alleviating poverty through Garilao's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program.

Earlier on Christmas eve, the MILF successfully facilitated the release of a kidnapped victim, Carey Biangco, 11, and turned him over to their parents in Datu Piang, Maguindanao. Al Haj Murad said over radio station DXMS: "We have facilitated his release as part of our confidence-building measures with the government for the talks." the boy was kidnapped on December 9, 1996.

The first of the two-day meeting of the Technical Committees on Agenda Setting and Cessation of Hostilities met on January 7, 1997 at the Dawah Center at Simuay Crossing, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. Although the meeting was described as cordial, they decided to scrap the second day and agreed to meet again on February 25-26, 1997 at the same place.

MILF Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazzali Jaafar said his group's ceasefire committee had submitted terms that include government recognition of all "MILF-controlled" areas, pullout of military troops from these areas, prevention of troops' entry into such areas, and observance of the Articles of War under the Geneva Convention.

Government panel chief Ambassador Fortunato Abat said the government technical committee also presented counter-proposals, whose details he declined to divulge. "We said we will study the proposals first and then meet again," he added.

Three days after, two news items hit the headlines. One told of an MILF public execution in Munai, Lanao del Norte, of three Maranao men who were found guilty by an MILF Council of Elders of violating Islamic laws on several counts. The other spoke of an MILF ambush of a convoy of civilian and military vehicles in Buldon, Maguindanao. Five soldiers and a rebel were killed and two soldiers wounded.

Two weeks later, on January 23, it was reported that at least 21 men believed to be members of the MILF and two Army soldiers were killed while several others were seriously wounded in heavy fighting in Buldon, Maguindanao, military reports said yesterday. Troopers have been conducting brigade-size operations in the past four days against more than 400 armed MILF members who have been allegedly terrorizing residents in several barangays of Buldon.

The following day, when the statistics of those killed rose to 26 MILF guerillas and four soldiers, the government panel offered their counterpart a local ceasefire around Buldon town. Troops were instructed to hold their positions.

Three days later, on January 27, the military and the MILF signed an initial

accord, a six-point temporary truce to end their fierce gunbattles in Buldon, Maguindanao, that have left heavy casualties and displaced thousands of families. The was signed by lawyer Lanang Ali and Maj. Gen. Joselin Nazareno, Army's 4th Infantry Division chief, in their respective capacities as chairmen of the MILF and government technical committees on cessation of hostilities. The terms of the truce, already cited above, applied only to Buldon.

Another round of armed confrontation was reported on February 21 at Basilan.

At least 15 men believed to be members of the MILF were killed and an undetermined number of others were wounded in a clash between rebels and government troopers two days earlier at sitio Egap, barangay Masola, in Isabela, Basilan. Reports said seven, including two officers, were wounded on the government side.

On March 6, a commander of the MILF and 64 armed followers have surrendered to the Philippine Army in Labangan, Zamboanga del Sur.

On March 19, a report recounted an army bombing raid on March 16 at an MILF camp in Buldon hit a Madrasah (Arabic School), killing 10 teenage pupils and their teacher; four 105 howitzer shells hit the Madrasah (Arabic School), said MILF leader Al Haj Murad.

About 1,000 families from Karigayan and nearby villages fled to the town of Parang to escape the shelling, he added. The military's air strike and ground assault came after the MILF rebels fired 20 rounds of 81mm mortars at an Army outpost in the village of Karigayan on Saturday, wounding three soldiers, said Army Lt. Noel Detoyato. Both sides traded accusations.

On March 23, representatives of the government panel and the MILF met in Cotabato in the face of the worsening conflict between Philippine Army troopers and MILF forces in Buldon, Maguindanao.

The news on April 2 said that during Holy Week, MILF members attacked military outposts in Sharif Aguak, Maguindanao using mortars and B40 rockets. The encounter resulted in several casualties on the part of the MILF. At around the same time, 24 MILF operating in Basilan surrendered in Zamboanga del Sur; they brought along their high powered firearms.

The GRP-MILF talks developed a new twist when Amb. Fortunato Abat, chair of the GRP Panel urged upon ARMM Gov Nur Misuari to mediate in the conflict between the military and the MILF forces in Buldon. Abat expressed belief that Misuari could be instrumental in convincing his Muslim brothers to renounce violence and talk peace with the government.

As a result of the series of clashes between the AFP and the MILF, the latter

decided, on April 8, to boycott the planned third regular GRP-MILF technical committee meeting scheduled for April 9-10 at Notre Dame University in Cotabato City. The MILF accused the government of engaging in "hypocritical maneuvers." Among the reasons cited for their boycott were the following:

- a) "The continued and unjustified sending in of additional government troops to Maguindanao, Cotabato City, and nearby areas, the latest of which is the deployment of three more battalions of Marine soldiers."
- b) "We are awaiting the results of the investigation of the March 16, 1997, bombing in Tugasig, Barira, Maguindanao (started) by the interim cease-fire monitoring committee... in April."
- c) "Another brigade-size Army troops had been reportedly pulled out from Region 9 to augment troops stations in Buldon, Maguindanao." Jaafar said the alleged military troop mobilizations came as an "insult to the MILF" and a "blatant show of insincerity" from the government because "we have all the while been sincere in our peace negotiations with them."

It should be recalled that as a result of the bombing of a Madrasah in Buldon on March 16 as well as to monitor the local truce, an Interim Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (ICMC) was formed by the GRP-MILF panels to be headed by Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI, President of Notre Dame University. For his part, Fr. Mercado announced through a local radio station that the two parties should give his committee ample time to do its work and proceed with the scheduled technical committee meeting to discuss more pressing issues.

Following the MILF announcement, the Army withdrew its troops guarding disputed villages in Buldon, Maguindanao. Meanwhile there were reports of more military-MILF clashes in Sirawai, Zamboanga del Norte. Until the day of the scheduled meeting, there were reports of several armed clashes. The military said MILF forces killed two soldiers and wounded two others in separate ambushes in Carmen and Aleosan towns, North Cotabato three or four days earlier. The rebels also strafed Army positions in Buldon, Maguindanao on April 21. The MILF, on the other hand, complained that soldiers raided rebel positions in barangay Kilangan, Pikit, North Cotabato on April 19, prompting a 15-hour gun battle the following day.

Known for his interest in the process, Speaker Jose de Venecia, Jr. flew to Marawi City on April 20 and told his audience at the Marawi State University Campus: "Let the wives and children of MILF commanders and cadres convince MILF rebels to lay down their arms and return to the fold of the law." He promised the Muslim women and youth that he would see to it that the MILF cadres and their families be provided with decent housing units and livelihood projects. He also accepted a resolution directing the House committee on national defense to investigate the bombing of a school in Buldon, Maguindanao, where 10 Muslim schoolchildren and one teacher were killed.

Although no substantial agreements were reached at the third technical committee meeting, things seemed to have gone for the better when the PNP and the MILF reached an informal alliance around the middle of May to jointly go after kidnapers and narcotics gangs masquerading as rebel groups. As far as the MILF are concerned both types of characters are engaged in un-Islamic activities. An MILF Memorandum issued on May 9 spelled out the Muslim rebel group's massive campaign against lawlessness in the MILF areas. Both armed forces and police units welcome the MILF decision. Now, they have a common cause.

Clearly moving forward, the GRP-MILF convened at Notre Dame University on June 17 to discuss a general ceasefire to halt clashes while the two sides try to work out an overall peace agreement. The meeting was expected to last until the next day.

No accord was reached on general ceasefire but they scheduled another meeting on June 28-29 to give themselves time to draft the overall peace agreement. Amb. Abat was quoted as having acknowledged that sporadic clashes are undermining the peace talks.

Meanwhile, a number of clashes have taken place. A rebel commander was killed as he led about 30 guerrillas in an attack on an army outpost early June 17 in Pikit, North Cotabato. On the same day, four soldiers were wounded when MILF rebels attacked an army outpost in Sultan Sa Barongis town in nearby Maguindanao province. An army spokesman said this attack was apparently in retaliation for the death of eight rebels on June 16 a clash with government soldiers who rescued 43 surveyors of the government-run Philippine National Oil Corp. held hostage by the rebels. One soldier was killed and another was wounded in that clash. The military said about 200 guerrillas held the 43 surveyors for about 10 hours and took personal belongings like watches and cash as well as four pieces of drilling equipment owned by the company. Two weeks earlier, eight guerrillas, one militiaman and a civilian hit in the cross fire were killed when the

rebels attacked two army outposts in Aleosan, another town in North Cotabato.

The situation was apparently more serious than meets the eye. In the last week of June, large scale fighting broke out in Pikit, Pagalungan, Carmen and Kabacan, North Cotabato, the largest so far since October 1996. Counting from June 16 when the MILF took 43 employees of PNOG as hostages to June 28, Southern Command spokesman Capt. Salih Indanan said 146 MILF guerrillas and 12 troopers have been killed, while close to 50,000 people flocked to evacuation centers in central Mindanao. The military captured Camp Rajamuda, a major base of the MILF, while MILF elements fled to another camp.

By July 4, officials of the government panel in the peace negotiations have sent emissaries from Manila to meet with Hashim Salamat, chairman of the MILF in an effort to keep the peace negotiations going. Messages were earlier published through the newspapers that MILF leaders have indicated their desire to break off from the talks. By July 6, President Ramos authorized ARMM Gov. Nur Misuari to initiate contact with the MILF to get the peace talks back on track. While orders were sent to the military field commanders to provide full cooperation to Misuari, they were also instructed to hold their present positions. As expected, both sides traded accusations of violating the local ceasefire agreement.

Heavy fighting erupted anew as the conflict entered into its third week. Heavy fighting broke out in Central Mindanao as three Army brigades, backed by tanks, helicopter gunships and three police regional commands, mounted a fresh offensive against MILF rebels.

Gov. Misuari entered MILF Camp Abubakar on July 10 where he had a three hour long meeting behind close doors with the MILF leadership. They refused to reveal the details of the meeting. But MILF vice chair Hadji Murad reiterated to Misuari that the MILF was willing to return to the peace talks if the situation is normalized, that is, if the 50,000 or so civilians displaced by the fighting have returned to their home areas, if there is a suspension of military offensives against rebel camps and forces, and if there is a pullout of soldiers from some areas. Murad said they would stand pat on this position' and will return to the negotiating table only if the demands are met.

The military have declared a unilateral ceasefire as early as July 9 and was willing to extend it indefinitely depending on the response of the MILF. The MILF replied that they did not need to declare a ceasefire since their posture was always defensive. Later in the week, the Armed Forces declared another week long extension of the unilateral ceasefire in order to create a positive atmosphere for the talks; this took effect on July 15 and would last up to July 22.

Both parties indeed returned to the negotiating table at Cagayan de Oro City and on July 18 and signed an agreement on the general cessation of hostilities in the whole of Mindanao effective July 21. President Ramos himself announced the breakthrough the following day. The agreement was signed by Ghazali Jaafar, chairman of the MILF panel, and former ambassador Fortunato Abat, chairman of the government panel, and witnessed by Executive Secretary Ruben D. Torres and Defense Secretary Renato De Villa.

Speaker Jose de Venecia, Jr., himself achieved his own breakthrough with his visit to Camp Abubakar in Matanog, Maguindanao on July 27 and meeting with the MILF leaders, led by vice chairman and chief of staff Gen. Al-Haj Murad, political vice chairman Ghazali Jaafar and internal affairs vice chairman Mimbantas. They agreed on three items, said Murad: First on the fight against kidnaping, secondly on the fight against drug cartels and thirdly we assured him that the MILF will cooperate in the development of Mindanao. More specifically, the last item meant that they agreed not to harm, delay or derail current and scheduled economic and infrastructure projects in areas targeted for development.

As agreed earlier they met again on July 30 to discuss the ground rules for the truce. Another breakthrough was reached when the two parties met again at Notre Dame University and signed on September 12 said ground rules, even if only one third of the expected document was completed. Lawyer Omar Umbar signed for the MILF and Gen. Josclin Nazareno, 4th Infantry Division commanding general, represented the government.

The committee would hold office at the Notre Dame Peace Center in Cotabato City and another at the Mindanao State University main campus in Marawi City.

The next meeting, the eighth in the series, was scheduled for November 12-13 at the Mindanao State University campus in Marawi City.

Two events added new dimensions into the talks. The first was the public execution of three criminals by the MILF in Masiu, Lanao del Sur which elicited public protests from as far as the center of government Manila. The other was the attack on Camp Siongco in Awang, Maguindanao by two foreign gunmen, armed with grenades and automatic rifles, killing three soldiers before being shot dead themselves. Five Army trainees and two civilians were wounded in the 30-minute gunbattle at the headquarters of the 6th Infantry Division. This was the first attack on a Philippine military camp involving foreign extremists. Major Gen. Raul Urgello, Division commanding officer said investigators recovered from the two gunmen documents showing they belonged to the Special Operations Group of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Hadji Murad naturally denied any link with the gunmen.

Newspapers reported on October 21 that the military has massed hundreds of soldiers backed by armored personnel carriers near the main camp, Camp Abubakar of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, raising fears of renewed war in Central Mindanao. Al Haj Murad, MILF vice chair, said the military was planning to storm Camp Abubakar in retaliation for last week's terrorist attack on Camp Siongco, headquarters of the Army's 6th Infantry Division. He added that the military was also using the MILF's public execution of two thieves in Lanao del Sur earlier this month as a pretext for launching an offensive against the MILF.

On the same day, Lt. Gen. Orlando Soriano, the newly appointed chairman of the government panel in the talks with the Southern Autonomous Group (SPAG), said in a report to the President during the Cabinet meeting that after an urgent meeting held today in Cotabato City, Maj. Gen. Joselin B. Nazareno and lawyer Lanang Ali, chairmen of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and MILF coordinating committees, respectively, on the general cessation of hostilities, both sides expressed their "continuing adherence to the spirit and intent" of the ceasefire agreement signed in Cagayan de Oro City on July 18, 1997. The scheduled talks at the Marawi Resort Hotel in Marawi City on November 12 and 13 would push through. Soriano replaced Amb. Abat who was earlier appointed as Secretary of National Defense. MILF lead negotiator Ghadzali Jaafar, vice chairman for political affairs, was also replaced by Uztads Abdul Aziz Mimbantas.

Soriano said that the GRP and MILF panels accepted the commitment made by the MILF Supreme Islamic Court that there will be no execution in the immediate future "as much as all cases of death conviction from the Regional Islamic Courts forwarded to it are still under review as mandated by Islamic law." Both sides also agreed to refer the incident involving the attack at Camp Siongco, Awang, Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao last October 14, 1997 to an independent fact-finding committee for inquiry.

On the matter of repositioning troops, the GRP panel has assured the MILF of the repositioning of the AFP forces to its October 16, 1997 positions.

It should be mentioned that the MILF played an important role in the release of the kidnapped priest, Monsignor Desmond Hartford of Marawi Prelature.

On summary executions, it would be recalled that on October 6, the MILF did the much publicized summary executions of three criminals in Masiu, Lanao del Norte.

The signing was witnessed by Soriano as chief government negotiator, his MILF counterpart Aleem Abdul Aziz Mimbantas, Maguindanao Gov. Zacaria

Candao, and Lanao del Sur Gov. Mahid Mutilan. They agreed to meet again in Marawi City on Dec. 1 and 2 to set the agenda and venue for formal talks.

December opened with news of MILF troop build up at Camp Abubakar. Al Haj Murad reportedly said the military build-up has been carried on by the front in the face of its ceasefire agreement with the government because "this is one of the major continuing programs of the MILF since 1985". He also added that the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) at present has 150,000 regular troops and some 300,000-strong militia force all over Mindanao.

The news on December 10 reported that the Police and the MILF have arrested six suspected kidnapers in separate operations during the previous week in fulfillment of their agreement in Marawi.

One of the biggest surprises of 1997 was the emergence of the legendary MILF leader, Hashim Salamat. On December 15, after twenty years of keeping away from the public eye, Salamat, Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), finally made his appearance before thousands of supporters at MILF's Camp Busrah in Butig, Lanao del Sur. The occasion was the MILF's 15th annual general assembly which was scheduled to last for three days. In his two-hour speech, mostly done in Maguindanaon language, he renewed the call to continue the Bangsamoro struggle whose ultimate goal is the establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao. At the press conference on December 18, Salamat stressed that an independent state for the Bangsamoro in Mindanao is "non-negotiable;" the MILF would reject any peace package that would not give Muslims a separate state in Mindanao. Earlier, however, Al Hadj Murad and Ghadzali Jaafar were quoted as having said that they were willing to settle for genuine autonomy. The MILF chairman also ruled out any working relationship with his former comrade, MNLF chair Nur Misuari, claiming Misuari is now "a politician who has received every concession from the government except the freedom of the Bangsamoro people."

On December 28, the day of the Innocents, the irrepressible Speaker Jose de Venecia announced that enduring peace in Mindanao is within sight. This was the content of a joint statement with Hadji Murad, prepared on November 29 during his second visit to Camp Abubakar. They were optimistic that a preliminary peace understanding with the government could be signed before January 30, and a historic final peace settlement before June 30 in 1998.

It should be recalled that during his Nov. 29 visit to Camp Abubakar, Speaker de Venecia opened a P50-million highway and a 50-hectare irrigation project deep in rebel held land in Maguindanao province. The projects were promised by

President Ramos and de Venecia as part of a government effort to bring socio-economic projects to rebel areas and end the isolation of the Muslim communities there.

For her part, Cotabato Governor Rosario Diaz urged on all government agencies in the province to religiously implement the projects entrusted them by the national government for the rehabilitation of Rajah Muda complex in Pikit. The offices tasked to implement the integrated plan for therehabilitation of Rajah Muda were the Departments of Health, Public Works and Highways, Agriculture and Social Welfare.

The next meeting of the two panels, earlier set for December 22-23 was reset on February 2-3 in consideration for the Christmas holidays and the Ramadhan.

Armed Clashes

Numerous armed clashes took place between the first meeting on January 7, 1997 and the signing of the localized Buldon truce, then more after that until the inking of the July 18 agreement on the general cessation of hostilities, accentuated by the heavy fighting for about three weeks in the Pikit-Pagalungan-Carmen-Kabacan area, the last one resulting in the death of some 146 MILF guerillas and 12 military troopers and the displacement of more than 50,000 civilian evacuees, yet statements of willingness to continue the talks were regularly noted on both sides by the media. Perhaps it was the pressure of war and the openness to talk peace that brought them back to the negotiating table and agree on the general cessation of hostilities.

There was something curious about practically all the armed encounters, especially the big ones which included heavy aerial bombardment and artillery. It seems they were only meant to deliver a message, never to finish off the "enemy". But of course we will never know.

The important thing is that they were making positive gains for the interest of all concerned.