

**PHILIPPINES: LATEST SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS
DEMONSTRATE THAT GOVERNMENTAL PEACE DEAL WITH
INSURGENT GROUPS IS UNDER THREAT**

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The recent string of insurgency events in Philippines show that the security context remains particularly tense, as the different terrorist groups and the government are involved in an open armed conflict. Indeed, Islamist terrorism is deeply rooted in Philippines namely in the southernmost regions, around Mindanao, Basilan, Jolo regions and other nearby islands. The most active Islamist groups in Philippines today are the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Moro National Liberation Front (MNL), Abu Sayyaf group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the recently emerged Justice for Islamic Movement group (JIM).

After several months of a relative calm, deadly clashes erupted on January 25 between security troops, MILF and BIFF fighters in Mamasapano, in which 44 soldiers were killed. The incident was considered as a potential deterrent for a possible peace agreement between the government and islamist rebel groups, especially with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

To recall, since January 2000, radical Islamists groups have been responsible for at least 40 major bombing attacks against civilians and the army as well as for a series of kidnappings, rapes, and executions. The Filipino government used political, legal and military means to fight terrorism, using the whole spectrum of methods from peace negotiations to military raids. So far the government managed to introduce

peace talks with the MILF and with the MNLF, but it failed so far to enter in negotiations with other groups.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was founded in 1969 by Nur Misuari, a former lecturer at the University of the Philippines in political sciences. Before creating the MNLF, he established in the 1960s the Mindanao Independence Movement with the aim to fight for an independent state in southern Philippines. Then, the Mindanao Independence Movement became the Moro National Liberation Front in 1969. The group proclaimed that its mission was to fight for the independence of the Bangsamoro Land. A peace agreement between the MNLF and the government was concluded in 1976 but it never managed to satisfy the hopes of both sides.

The MNLF also gave birth to many breakaway groups and the most important is the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which is now the biggest terrorist group in the country.

The MILF was founded in 1978 by Hashim Salamat and 57 MNLF fighters, who split off from MNLF due to numerous political differences. Both insurgent groups were actively involved in criminal activities, such as kidnappings, bombings, piracy, etc.

Today the MILF group is considered to be the largest insurgent group in the Philippines, with between 12 000 to 15 000 members in 2014. But unlike the other terrorists groups in the country, the MILF did not pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and remains in favor of peace talks with the Filipino government.

The peace negotiations initially began in July 1997, when the MILF administration and the government of Philippines signed the first Agreement on General Cessation of Hostilities. On March 27, 2014, MILF and the government signed a final peace agreement in Manila. But the attack on January 25 this year put in danger the future of this accord. To recall, the fighting erupted between the Special Action Forces and members of MILF and BIFF in Tukanalipao village, in Mamasapano town, Maguindanao. The shooting reportedly erupted as the SAF troops penetrated this town, without prior coordination with the MILF, which is a condition of the peace

agreement. The security operation aimed at capturing the notorious bomb maker Zulkifli bin Hir, alias Marwan, a terrorist engaged in the training of local jihadists to join the Islamic State (IS) and involved in the Bali bombings in 2002 where 202 people were killed and 209 were injured.

Mamasapano clash left 44 security officers and 8 terrorists were killed, marking the deadliest fighting for Filipino security troops over the past decade. Zulkifli was also killed in the raid. Despite growing skepticism in media, following the incident MILF expressed its will to pursue the peace process with the government in order to help it to find another famous terrorist, Basit Usman, a bomb-making expert linked with Abu Sayyaf. The military believes that Usman and 5 other terrorists are actually being protected by a new terrorist group called Justice for Islamic Movement (JIM). MILF promised the army to cooperate in order to find the JIM fighters and Basit Usman.

Justice for Islamic Movement (JIM) is headed by Muhamad Ali Tambako, a former member of the MNLF, the MILF and the BIFF. The JIM reportedly cut ties with BIFF in November 2013 but the army confirmed its official creation on March 4, 2014 as troops launched an operation to find Basit Usman.

The tragic encounter in Mamasapano caused an important recoil in the peace agreement, rising doubts on both sides. MILF announced that it would carry out its own internal investigation of the incident. In the Congress, following the clash, 2 senators retrieved their endorsement of the draft bill about the peace agreement considering that it has slowed down its work and consequently has postponed consideration of the provisions regarding peace, security and policing. For the implementation of the peace agreement, the Congress has to pass a bill which must then be ratified by plebiscite. Actually the bill is a part of the complex agreement between both parts; it includes “normalization” processes to the MILF organization just as the decommission of MILF forces, the dismantling of other armed groups, the redeployment of the Armed Forces, the creation of a new Police Service for the Bangsamoro, etc.

So far MILF is the only organization to have accepted to negotiate a peace agreement with the government. This peace deal provides autonomy (but not independence) to

the mainly Muslim areas of Bangsamoro. The issues of a constitution for Bangsamoro and the disarmament remain a cause of tensions between the sides.

Despite all these disagreements, many security experts remain quite optimistic concerning perspectives of the peace deal between MILF and the government, while this is not the case with other radical Islamist groups in the region.

One of the most active groups is Abu Sayyaf, based in and around Jolo and Basilan for 40 years. The group has been the author of bombings, kidnappings, assassinations in its fight for an independent Islamic province. The Abu Sayyaf group has organized some of the worst and sadly famous terrorist attacks in the Philippines in the late 1990s and 2000s, as bombings or beheadings of hostages. The most famous attack perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf is the “Superferry 14” bombing on February 27, 2014, that killed 116 people, Philippines’s worst terrorist attack and the world’s deadliest terrorist attack at sea. The group has increased terrorist activities after having pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in August 2014, and all the incidents perpetrated since then prove the increasing influence of IS and the growing ambitions of the group to establish an independent Islamic province in the country. By pledging allegiance to the IS group, Abu Sayyaf gained an important media attention, raising fears of the possible security consequences of this alliance for Philippines.

Peace negotiations were also refused by the breakaway BIFF group, created in 2008. Just as Abu Sayyaf, the BIFF organization has pledged allegiance to the IS in August 15.

All the attempts to launch peace negotiations between Abu Sayyaf and the government till the present moment have been largely unsuccessful, apart negotiations directly linked to hostage situations and carried out with numerous intermediates; Abu Sayyaf so far has refused all possibilities of direct negotiations.

With BIFF, the government has more or less the same strategy as with Abu Sayyaf. A massive military campaign, launched against the BIFF and JIM on February 11 in Mindanao, so far resulted in at least 90 BIFF fighters dead. The government also

assured that the operation is 'very targeted' and would not affect peace negotiations with other insurgent groups.

The attempt to conclude a peace agreement with some insurgent groups, while carrying out at the same time an important military crackdown on other rebel groups, presents an important challenge for Filipino security authorities. However, successful advancements in peace negotiations between MILF and the government may create an important precedent for other islamist groups, marking, probably, a new trend for the security of the whole region.

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