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**THE PHILIPPINES:
CONFLICT AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN
MINDANAO AND THE SULU ARCHIPELAGO**

A Writenet Report by Eva-Lotta E. Hedman

**commissioned by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,
Emergency and Technical Support Service**

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Acronyms

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NDCC	National Disaster Coordinating Council

Executive Summary¹

The second half of 2008 and the first months of 2009 have witnessed a marked resurgence of violent conflict in areas of central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, forcibly dislocating hundreds of thousands of residents. This recent wave of forced displacement follows an established pattern in the southern Philippines, with large-scale armed clashes repeatedly spurring massive flight over the past decade. Against this backdrop, this report provides an overview of the patterns of forced displacement in the region over the past six months, and a contextualization of the overall pattern of recurring forced displacement observed in parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago over the past decade.

The backdrop to the conflict in the southern Philippines is the problematic pattern of integration of the Muslim minority population. The early 1970s witnessed armed separatist mobilization for an independent Moro homeland under the rubric of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). By the mid-1970s, nearly 75 percent of the troops of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) had been deployed to Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, with violent clashes leading to an estimated 50,000 casualties and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents. With a peace accord signed in 1976, live-and-let-live arrangements emerged in the southern Philippines, allowing armed Muslim groups to enjoy considerable local power. The resumption of democratic elections in the mid-late 1980s, and the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the 1990s facilitated this pattern of accommodation. From 2000, however, and deepening with the onset of the Global War On Terror in late 2001, the southern Philippines saw large-scale government military campaigns in the name of “counter-terrorism”, causing casualties, destruction, and forced displacement on a scale not seen since the early-mid 1970s. A “total war” begun in 2000 dramatically reduced the effective control enjoyed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) over Muslim areas of central Mindanao. A later wave of military operations in the islands of the Sulu Archipelago was waged against the shadowy small Islamist terrorist network known as the Abu Sayyaf Group.

From 2006 up through mid-2008, however, a new pattern of accommodation had emerged between the Philippine government and the MILF, with informal understandings accompanied by formal diplomatic negotiations, leading to a Memorandum of Understanding in early-mid 2008. But the proposed accord was opposed by many Christian interests in Mindanao and by elements within the MILF as well. Tensions increased, and both sides began to rearm and remobilize their forces. By mid-2008, armed skirmishes were reported in mixed Muslim/Christian areas of central Mindanao, with MILF attacks on villages provoking a large-scale AFP military campaign that has continued, on and off, well into 2009. Meanwhile, kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan and Sulu sparked renewed counter-terrorism operations by Philippine government forces in the Sulu Archipelago. In both central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the resurgence of armed conflict has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents, only a minority of whom have found refuge in the government’s evacuation centres. February and March 2009 saw renewed fighting and large-scale flight in some areas, with little prospect of a resolution of the conflict in the southern Philippines on the horizon.

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1 Introduction

Over the course of the second half of 2008 and the first few months of 2009, a resurgence of violent conflict in areas of central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago has caused widespread forced displacement for tens, indeed hundreds, of thousands of residents. This recent wave of forced displacement represents the continuation of an established pattern in the southern provinces of the Philippines, in which a series of large-scale armed clashes have spurred massive flight over the past decade. It is thus essential to understand the broader context of a conflict ostensibly pitting Philippine government forces against armed separatist groups fighting for a “Moro homeland” for the Muslim minority in the region, as well as Islamist terrorist groups linked to the Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah and the global *jihadi* network of Al-Qa’ida.

To date, there has been little sustained or serious attention to, or empirical investigation of, the repeated waves of forced displacement in the southern Philippines since the turn of the century, or to the broader conflict within which it has unfolded. The Philippine government, other foreign powers (most notably the United States), and various multilateral humanitarian agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and media outlets have remained largely passive and silent in the face of this large-scale pattern of forced displacement. Despite the best efforts of aid workers on the ground, the assistance and protection offered to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago has been woefully inadequate, and information on the causes and conditions of their hardship remains patchy and unreliable in terms of sources.

Against this backdrop, this report is intended to provide an overview of the observable patterns of forced displacement which have unfolded in the southern Philippines over the past six months, drawing on the limited available information to suggest the broad outlines of what can be firmly established at this juncture. In addition, the report is also intended to provide a contextualization of the overall pattern of recurring forced displacement witnessed in parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago over the past decade, in terms of the abiding problems of conflict in this troubled region of the Philippines. It is to this task of conflict analysis that the report first turns.

2 Conflict and Displacement in the Southern Philippines, 1970s-2008

The broad context for the conflict in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago is the awkward and incomplete pattern of integration into the Republic of the Philippines experienced by the sizeable Muslim minority residing in the southern provinces of the archipelago. Spanish colonial rule, which was established in lowland areas of Luzon and the Visayas in the mid-sixteenth century, never extended far beyond a set of forts and settlements along the coasts of northern and western Mindanao, with the sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao in particular representing structures of Islamic authority that persisted in the face of efforts at Spanish evangelization and expansion of colonial rule.² The Muslim population in the southern parts of the Philippine archipelago was demonized by the Spanish colonial regime as “*moros*” (“Moors”), with anti-Islamic prejudices from early post-*Reconquista* Spain imported into the

² Iletto, R.I., *Maguindanao: 1860-1888: The Career of Datu Uto of Buayan*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1971; Warren, J.F., *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*, Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985

Philippines and promoted for years to come in what today remains an overwhelmingly Catholic country.³

Under American colonial rule from the turn of the twentieth century until the Japanese occupation of 1942-1945, a sustained “pacification” campaign forcibly but successfully subsumed the Muslim minority provinces into a unified, archipelago-wide Philippine colony, thus prefiguring the Republic of the Philippines which achieved independence in 1946. As in the rest of the Philippines, “national integration” unfolded through elections, with locally elected municipal mayors, provincial governors, congressmen, and even senators from the Muslim areas of the country drawn into the complicated structure of faction-based patronage politics of early post-independence oligarchical democracy. Muslim politicians joined the two major political parties – the Liberals and the Nacionalistas – and combined easily and seemingly unproblematically with Catholic politicians in Manila and elsewhere in the country to fight local factional battles for elected offices and the spoils that accompanied access to state power. The minority Muslim areas of the archipelago remained firmly subordinated not only in political terms vis-à-vis Manila, but in economic terms vis-à-vis the plantation owners, logging concessionaires, mining operators, electricity companies, shipping firms, banks, and agri-business ventures from Manila and other – non-Muslim – port cities of the archipelago. But in this regard, Muslim pockets of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago resembled non-Muslim hinterlands, also experiencing internal colonization during the American colonial period and the first few decades following independence.⁴

With the declaration of martial law by then president Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, however, a belated effort to mobilize Moros in support of an independent homeland began to crystallize in parts of Muslim Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Over the course of his six years in office, Marcos had begun to assert unprecedented powers vis-à-vis local politicians, moving with particular vigour against opposition governors, congressmen, and mayors associated with the opposition Liberal Party, in the Muslim provinces as elsewhere across the country.⁵ At the same time, the pattern of protracted Christian migration and settlement in Mindanao had begun to give rise to a deepening conflict between established Muslim communities and Christian settlers, businessmen, and local politicians over land rights and other localized natural-resource issues in Mindanao, even as the small numbers of young Muslim students at universities in Manila – and institutions of Islamic learning outside the country – had begun to explore the political implications of their identity as Moros.⁶

The 1972 declaration of martial law was followed by a set of new developments that also helped to set the stage for some kind of Moro separatist mobilization. Under martial law, President Marcos worked to centralize power in Manila, and in presidential hands, thus diminishing the prerogatives of local politicians as brokers for local interests around the archipelago. With the assumption of authoritarian powers and the centralization of control over law enforcement, moreover, Marcos moved to dislodge entrenched local politicians from their bailiwicks, with the Philippine Constabulary, now subordinated to the Armed

³ Scott, W.H., *Slavery in the Spanish Philippines*, Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991

⁴ Abinales, P.N., *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Making of the Philippine Nation-State*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000

⁵ McKenna, T.M., The Sources of Muslim Separatism in Cotabato, *Pilipinas*, No 21, Fall 1993, pp. 5-28

⁶ George, T.J.S., *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980

Forces of the Philippines (AFP), disbanding the “private armies” of locally appointed police forces and other armed contingents loyal to municipal mayors and provincial governors. The centralization of law enforcement also meant a clampdown and assertion of control by Manila vis-à-vis the vast smuggling networks that stretched from the Sulu Archipelago through Mindanao and up to Luzon, thus further depriving many entrenched local Muslim businessmen and politicians – and their non-Muslim counterparts – from the spoils of access to local state office. The attempt to centralize power in Manila also worked largely in favour of the better-connected Christian settler communities and business interests which had begun to make inroads in Muslim areas of Mindanao as well as the Sulu Archipelago.⁷

Against this backdrop, the early 1970s saw the emergence of full-blown armed separatist mobilization in support of an independent Moro homeland, under the auspices of the newly formed Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Backed by dislodged and disaffected local Muslim politicians affiliated with the Liberal Party, supported by Muslim communities engaged in conflict with Christian settlers and business interests, and in some measure encouraged by sympathizers elsewhere in the Muslim world, the MNLF represented a major challenge to Marcos’s martial-law regime. By the mid-1970s, nearly 75 per cent of the troops of the AFP had been deployed to Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, with violent clashes between the MNLF and the AFP leading to an estimated 50,000 casualties and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents of the southern provinces of the Philippines.⁸

With the forging of a Libya-brokered ceasefire in 1976, however, the full-blown conflict in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago subsided, lapsing into a new constellation characterized by complex local accommodations, live-and-let-live and power-sharing arrangements, and effectively parcellized sovereignty, with occasional episodes of violent conflict punctuating an uneasy and unstable equilibrium. In lieu of sustained armed conflict, some local commanders of the MNLF re-emerged as municipal mayors and provincial governors in some southern provinces, working out deals for the control of “turf” with their AFP counterparts and with interested parties in Manila. At the same time, factionalism within the MNLF had facilitated the emergence in the mid-late 1970s of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a group described variously as an instrument of Marcos’s divide-and-rule tactics and as an expression of the incipient Islamicization of the Moro struggle for independence. Thus the late 1970s and early-mid 1980s saw a lull in the conflict in the southern Philippines, without any kind of effort to resolve the underlying problems that had pitted forces claiming to represent Moro aspirations against the Philippine government in Manila.⁹

With the ouster of Marcos in 1986 and the return to oligarchical democracy in the Philippines in the years that followed, the terms of exchange between powerbrokers in Manila and the Muslim provinces of the southern Philippines began to shift, as did the possibilities for the “reintegration” of the Moro population. With politicians in Manila actively courting MNLF and MILF commanders to win access both to Muslim voters and to the markets and natural

⁷ McKenna, T.M., Martial Law, Moro Nationalism, and Traditional Leadership in Cotabato, *Pilipinas*, No 18, Spring 1992, pp. 1-17

⁸ Noble, L.G., The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines, *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 49, No 3, 1976, pp. 405-24

⁹ McKenna, T.M., *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998

resources of the southern provinces, new opportunities for alliances and for the reincorporation of Muslim Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago began to emerge. It was in this context that the 1990s saw the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the formal cessation of armed hostilities by the MNLF, and, by 1996, the assumption of the ARMM governorship by long-time MNLF chairman Nur Misuari, in a deal crafted between Misuari and then president Fidel Ramos (1992-1998).¹⁰

But this effective settlement was quickly disrupted by developments in the national and international political arenas. In 1998, the action-film star Joseph Estrada won a landslide victory in the presidential elections through a combination of popular appeal and bandwagoning support from machine politicians across the country. Estrada, however, had won few votes in the Muslim provinces of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago and instead of linkages to MNLF and MILF commanders, the new president enjoyed warm ties with a set of Christian politicians with business interests in both Christian and Muslim areas of the southern Philippines. Essentially unencumbered and unconstrained vis-à-vis local Muslim powerbrokers and egged on by his local Christian political allies, Estrada declared a “total war” against the MILF in 2000 even as he began to move against Misuari, replacing the long-time MNLF chairman as ARMM Governor in favour of a close personal ally. These efforts to reassert Manila’s prerogatives in the southern Philippines involved a massive AFP campaign in parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, causing many casualties and large-scale displacement, and generating the basis for a violent response in the name of the Moro people. Thus the turn of the twentyfirst century saw not only small pockets of armed resistance from MILF and MNLF forces, but also the resurgence of kidnappings, bank robberies, and various terrorist attacks and atrocities by the shadowy Abu Sayyaf Group on Basilan, an island in the Sulu Archipelago. Founded by a returning veteran of the *jihād* in Afghanistan and allegedly enjoying links to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qa’ida, the Abu Sayyaf Group assiduously promoted the notion that transnational Islamist terrorist networks had extended themselves to the southern Philippines, while obscuring its own connections to local politicians and elements in the security forces.¹¹

Against this backdrop, the events of 11 September 2001 and the onset of the so-called Global War on Terror encouraged an intensification of Manila’s “forward movement” in the southern Philippines, with the new president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, keen to demonstrate her loyalty and usefulness to the Bush administration in Washington. With US military assistance and active involvement, the AFP extended their counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism campaigns in Muslim areas of Mindanao and in parts of the Sulu Archipelago. With the Abu Sayyaf already identified as an Al-Qa’ida-linked Islamist terrorist group, and the MILF accused of harbouring fugitive elements from Jemaah Islamiyah, the shadowy network blamed for a series of terrorist bombings in Indonesia, the assertion of Manila’s power in the southern Philippines was given active encouragement, support, and legitimation by the United States.¹² The increasing casualties, damages, and waves of forced displacement

¹⁰ Gaerlan, K., and Stankovitch, M. (eds.), *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines*, Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000

¹¹ Sidel, J.T., *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment*, Washington: East-West Center, 2007

¹² Niksch, L.A., *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*, Washington: Congressional Research Service, 25 January 2002, <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/RL31265.pdf> [accessed March 2008]; Lum, T., and L.A. Niksch, *The Republic of the Philippines: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington: Congressional Research Service, January 2008, pp. 9-15, 16-18, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33233.pdf> [accessed March 2009]; and Docena, H., *Unconventional Warfare: Are US Special Forces Engaged in an ‘Offensive War’ in the*

accompanying the campaign waged by the US and Philippine governments in the southern Philippines attracted little public attention and generated little official concern.¹³ The response of the armed groups mobilized in parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago – most notably the onset of a terrorist bombing campaign in cities across the country – was deemed an ample post-facto justification for the prosecution of the Global War On Terror in the southern Philippines.

At the same time, however, the Arroyo administration in Manila in some measure reverted to the pattern of earlier, pre-Estrada national governments, and began to explore formal and informal arrangements for a modus vivendi with some of the so-called Moro separatist rebels against whom they were ostensibly mobilized. Arroyo urged the United States not to classify the MILF as a “terrorist organization” and in exchange for such protection reportedly extracted intelligence information and assurances from MILF commanders that were said to help thwart further terrorist attacks in the Philippines. Live-and-let-live arrangements between the MILF and the AFP began to develop, as did other kinds of local understandings, as well as formal peace talks brokered by the Malaysian government.¹⁴ With national elections scheduled for 2010, the Arroyo administration appeared keen to build up a set of linkages with local powerbrokers in the Muslim areas of the southern Philippines that would promise some kind of privileged access to the sizeable blocs of Muslim voters in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

It is against this backdrop that the resurgence of large-scale armed conflict in the southern Philippines in the second half of 2008 and early 2009 should be situated. From 2006 up through mid-2008, after all, negotiations between representatives of the Philippine government and the MILF had borne fruit in a Memorandum of Understanding that was said to provide the formal basis for a long-term settlement of the conflict in the southern Philippines. With the unveiling of this tentative agreement, however, the political constraints on a formal settlement of the conflict soon became apparent. Politicians claiming to represent Christian communities in Mindanao appealed to the Supreme Court to impose a restraining order to prevent the Arroyo administration from signing the agreement, and otherwise began to mobilize public sentiment and political machinery against the deal. Meanwhile in Mindanao, armed groups affiliated with local Christian politicians, on the one hand, and the MILF, on the other, began to manoeuvre into position in anticipation of a return to violent confrontation. The stage was set for a return to full-blown large-scale conflict, with open

Philippines?, Quezon City: Focus on the Global South, January 2007, <http://www.focusweb.org/pdf/unconventionalwarfare.pdf> [accessed March 2009]

¹³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Philippines: Displacement Increases as Mindanao's Peace Process Stumbles On*, Geneva, August 2008, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/CDB0ED915407FD59C12574AA00511906/\\$file/Philippines Overview aug08.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/CDB0ED915407FD59C12574AA00511906/$file/Philippines%20Overview%20aug08.pdf) [accessed March 2009]

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process*, Singapore, July 2004, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2863&l=1> [accessed March 2009]; Buendia, R.G., The GRP-MILF Peace Talks: Quo Vadis?, in Singh, D. and Chin Kin Wah (eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, 2005, pp. 205-21, [https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/4430/1/GRP-MILF Rizal Buendia.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/4430/1/GRP-MILF_Rizal_Buendia.pdf) [accessed March 2009]; International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: Counter-Insurgency Vs. Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao*, Jakarta, May 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5441&l=1> [accessed March 2009]

hostilities taking hundreds of lives and displacing thousands in contested areas of central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.¹⁵

3 Conflict and Displacement in the Southern Philippines, 2008-2009

The second half of 2008 and the first few months of 2009 witnessed the resumption of armed violence in the southern Philippines, with attacks by MILF elements, government troops and other groups, leaving high numbers of casualties and causing considerable forced displacement in parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Here, as noted above, there is only limited available information on the nature and extent of the violence and dislocation unfolding on the ground, with sources offering only a sketchy picture of events, developments, and trends over the past nine months. But it is possible to provide a broad outline of the patterns of violence and forced displacement observed since the resumption of large-scale violent conflict in the southern Philippines in July 2008.¹⁶

3.1 Central Mindanao: Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato

From mid-2008 onwards, much of the forced displacement observed in the southern Philippines has unfolded in the central Mindanao provinces of North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, and Maguindanao. The first two of these provinces, North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte, are notable for their predominantly Christian populations, and for the active resistance of local Christian communities, businessmen, and politicians against possible inclusion of Muslim villages within an enlarged Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. These two provinces thus include within their borders areas which are highly prone to contestation and conflict, and which have complex histories of inter-religious violence dating back to the 1960s.

Indeed, mounting tensions and small-scale incidents of violence were already reported in various villages and towns of these two provinces in June and July of 2008, even as representatives of the Philippine government and the MILF were ironing out the details of the Memorandum of Agreement in Kuala Lumpur. Armed contingents of the MILF were known to be making their presence felt in areas of Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato. Local police forces and civilian militias organized by Christian politicians, as well as elements of the AFP, were already engaged in skirmishes with these MILF contingents by late July 2008.¹⁷

With the highly publicized Supreme Court decision to issue a restraining order on the government in early August 2008, moreover, large-scale violence began to occur in areas of North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte, leading thousands of local residents to flee for refuge in nearby towns and villages. Hundreds of MILF fighters under a renegade commander, Ameril

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao*, Jakarta, October 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5740&l=1> [accessed March 2009]

¹⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Philippines: Displacement Increases as Mindanao's Peace Process Stumbles On*

¹⁷ Piñol Brothers Decry Military 'Neglect' of North Cotabato, *Inquirer.net*, 6 August 2008, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20080806-153039/Piol-brothers-decry-military-neglect-of-North-Cotabato> [accessed March 2009]; Piñol Denies Urging People to Arm Selves, *Sun-Star Davao*, 7 August 2008, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/net/2008/08/07/pi.ol.denies.urguing.people.to.arm.selves.html> [accessed March 2009]; Amnesty International, *Shattered Peace in Mindanao: The Human Cost of Conflict in the Philippines*, London, October 2008, pp. 11-12, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA35/008/2008/en> [accessed March 2009]; International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao*, pp. 8-10

Umbra Kato, allegedly seized control of a cluster of villages (*barangay*) in North Cotabato, burning houses and taking hostages, but soon found themselves under a massive assault by AFP troops alongside local militias, and were forced to withdraw. A subsequent MILF attack on towns in Lanao del Norte met a similar response from government forces in mid-August 2008.¹⁸

The MILF attacks combined with the government response to leave dozens of casualties, cause large-scale damage and disruption to local homes, businesses, and the agricultural economy, and force tens of thousands of residents into flight. As fighting between government forces and the MILF spilled over into Maguindanao province, the overwhelmingly Muslim stronghold of the MILF, as well as the nearby Mindanao provinces of Lanao del Sur, Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat, and the recently abolished province of Shariff Kabunsuan, which had formally reverted to Maguindanao in July 2008. Alongside the fighting between forces on the ground, AFP helicopters and warplanes engaged in large-scale strafing and bombing from the air as the campaign against the MILF unfolded across wide swathes of central Mindanao. Fighting continued for several weeks, only subsiding in mid-October 2008.¹⁹

All told, more than 600,000 people were said to have been forcibly displaced by the fighting, with little more than one-third of this total said to have returned to their home communities and residences by October 2008. Of the estimated remaining 400,000-plus IDPs, only one-third were reported to be housed at government shelters and refugee camps, mostly in schools.²⁰ Reports on conditions in these IDP camps in late 2008 noted the extreme inadequacy of security, shelter, food, and medical care provided, with some evacuees (*bakwit*), aid workers, and other observers claiming that government troops were harassing Muslim IDPs and hindering the distribution of humanitarian relief among them, ostensibly out of concern that the IDP camps were serving as refuge and recruiting grounds for MILF sympathizers and supporters.²¹

As of February 2009, more than 100,000 IDPs were estimated to be still encamped in the makeshift “tent cities” and other shelters provided in the government’s evacuation centres, with perhaps twice as many IDPs still finding refuge elsewhere.²² The return of these IDPs to their home communities, urged increasingly vocally by Philippine government officials, remains fraught with difficulty and danger, under conditions of continuing militarization and

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao*, pp. 12-13

¹⁹ Task Force Civilian Protection [et.al.], *Unraveling Stories of Human Rights Violations in Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato and Maguindanao: A Fact-Finding Mission Report*, Cotabato City: Mindanao People’s Peace Movement, October 2008, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpDocuments\)/2BA42277DF37810BC1257535003A1223/\\$file/Unraveling+stories+of+HR+violations+Nov08.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/2BA42277DF37810BC1257535003A1223/$file/Unraveling+stories+of+HR+violations+Nov08.pdf) [accessed March 2009]

²⁰ Philippines, National Disaster Coordinating Council, *NDCC Update: Sitrep No. 81 re IDPs in Mindanao*, 15 January 2009, [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/FBUO-7NJET2-full-report.pdf/\\$File/full-report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/FBUO-7NJET2-full-report.pdf/$File/full-report.pdf) [accessed March 2009]; Philippines, National Disaster Coordinating Council, *NDCC Update: Sitrep No. 82 re IDPs in Mindanao*, 27 January 2009, [http://reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/LSGZ-7NQHG5-full-report.pdf/\\$File/full-report.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/LSGZ-7NQHG5-full-report.pdf/$File/full-report.pdf) [accessed March 2009]

²¹ Amnesty International, *Shattered Peace in Mindanao*, pp. 15-22

²² United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Philippines: Death and Disease Stalk IDP Camps, Talayan, 23 February 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83089> [accessed March 2009]

sporadic armed fighting in various areas of central Mindanao. According to some reports, towards mid-March 2009 Philippine government officials were beginning to close down IDP camps in Mindanao, claiming that the restoration of order by government security forces enabled safe return by IDPs to their home communities.²³

Over the course of February and early March 2009, however, the resumption of fighting between elements of the MILF and Philippine government forces had given rise to new waves of forced displacement, fresh flows of IDPs, and renewed concerns among local residents and the IDPs remaining in evacuation centres in Central Mindanao. Clashes in areas of Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, and North Cotabato in particular reportedly led hundreds of residents to flee their homes and communities.²⁴ The Philippine government's National Disaster Coordinating Council, as of late January 2009, estimated that there were as many as 270,000 IDPs across the central Mindanao provinces of Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Lanao del Sur, and Maguindanao, the majority of whom remained outside the government's understaffed, poorly funded and now closure threatened evacuation centres.²⁵ The months ahead, moreover, appear certain to see further violent conflict in these troubled areas of central Mindanao, with resultant casualties, damage and destruction, and forced displacement on a scale hard to appreciate fully, given the difficulties of reporting and documenting the conflict and its terrible consequences on the ground.

3.2 Sulu Archipelago: Basilan and Sulu Provinces

Meanwhile, the past nine months have also witnessed a somewhat less dramatic resurgence of fighting in areas of the Sulu Archipelago which have a longer history of violent conflict dating back to the 1970s if not earlier. Here the local dynamics of the conflict are coloured less by the kind of inter-communal tensions and cleavages found in central Mindanao with its sizeable Christian settler population and "frontier" disputes over land and natural resources, and more by internecine battles between rival armed groups contesting control over trade and transportation chokepoints.²⁶ The Sulu Archipelago, after all, lies on the southwestern fringes of the Philippines, close to the Malaysian state of Sabah and the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. The islands of the Sulu Archipelago are deeply immersed in labour migration, with thousands of its residents seeking work in Sabah and Sulawesi and on the tuna-fishing boats

²³ United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Philippines: Government Order to Vacate IDP Camps Raises Concerns, Talayan, 16 February 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82939> [accessed March 2009]; United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Philippines: One IDP Camp in Mindanao Closed But Security Remains a Concern, Manila, 10 March 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83392> [accessed March 2009]

²⁴ Renewed Moro Rebs' Attacks Force Residents to Flee Homes in NorthCot, *MindaNews*, Kidapawan City, 29 January 2009, http://www.mindanews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5838 [accessed March 2009]; North Cot Villagers Flee Homes as Soldiers, MILF Clash Anew, *MindaNews*, Kidapawan City, 7 February 2009, http://www.mindanews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5880&Itemid=190 [accessed March 2009]; Soldiers Fire at Kato's Hiding Place in Kabuntalan, *MindaNews*, Midsayap, 2 March 2009, http://www.mindanews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6012&Itemid=190 [accessed March 2009]; Clashes Erupt Anew in Lanao, *MindaNews*, Iligan City, 11 March 2009, http://www.mindanews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6059&Itemid=50 [accessed March 2009]

²⁵ Philippines, National Disaster Coordinating Committee, *NDCC Update: Sitrep No. 82*

²⁶ Kiefer, T.M., *The Taosug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Muslim Society*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972

of the Sulu Sea, and many more earning their livelihoods through the barter trade and smuggling, as well as” such related activities as fall under the broad rubric of “piracy”.²⁷

Alongside a long local history of violent competition for wealth and power in the Sulu Archipelago, there is a more recent history of armed mobilization in the name of the Muslim Moro minority and, more grandiosely, in the name of Islam. In this regard, it is worth noting that the MNLF has long regarded the island province of Sulu as its stronghold, with MNLF chairman Nur Misuari a Taosug-speaking native son of the province. Even as the MILF came to achieve a pre-eminent position among the Maguindanao-speaking Moros (and, to a lesser extent, their Maranao-speaking co-religionists) in central Mindanao, the MNLF has appeared to prevail in Sulu.

Meanwhile, the island province of Basilan, located a brief ferry ride from the western Mindanao port of Zamboanga City, has, since the early 1990s, played host to a third avowed champion of Moro aspirations and, more broadly, of Muslim mobilization world-wide. Beginning in the early 1990s, a shadowy armed outfit calling itself the Abu Sayyaf Group emerged, reportedly founded by a returning *mujahidin* from Afghanistan and committed to the extension of the global *jihad* to the southern Philippines. Engaging in sporadic kidnappings, bank robberies, and killings of local priests, foreign missionaries, and other victims from Christian areas of Basilan and the Zamboanga peninsula, the Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword) Group has also been involved in more sustained forms of extortion and racketeering, by some accounts in coordination with local politicians, police forces, and elements of the AFP. Never said to number more than a few hundred fighters – unlike the MILF and MNLF which are said to comprise thousands of armed guerrillas – the Abu Sayyaf Group has remained limited in its presence to Samal and Yakan speaking areas of Basilan and small pockets of nearby Sulu.²⁸

Yet the Abu Sayyaf Group’s alleged links to Al-Qa’ida, its avowed *jihadi* goals and sympathies, and its implication in a series of bombings in various locations across the Philippines have made it an important target in the Global War On Terror. Over the past several years, AFP contingents and accompanying US Special Forces troops have conducted a sustained “counter-terrorism” campaign in parts of Basilan as well as Sulu in pursuit of this Islamist terrorist group. Combined with efforts to restrain the MNLF since the forced ouster of Misuari from the ARMM governorship in 2000 and its ill-fated return to armed rebellion, this campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group has made for recurring violence and displacement in many parts of the Sulu Archipelago.²⁹

²⁷ Hedman, E-L. E. and J.T. Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, Post-Colonial Trajectories*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 166-71

²⁸ Turner, M., Terrorism and Secession in the Southern Philippines: The Rise of the Abu Sayyaf, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 17, No 1, June 1995, pp. 1-19; Vitug, M.D., and G. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 2000, pp. 192-245; Turner, M., The Management of Violence in a Conflict Organization: The Case of the Abu Sayyaf, *Public Organization Review*, Vol. 3, No 4, December 2003, pp. 387-401; Banlaoi, R.C., The Abu Sayyaf Group: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism, in D. Singh and L.C. Salazar (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006, pp. 247-62; Ugarte, E.F., The Alliance System of the Abu Sayyaf, 1993-2000, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No 2, 2008, pp. 125-44

²⁹ Rogers, S., Beyond the Abu Sayyaf: Lessons of Failure in the Philippines, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004, pp. 15-20

Most recently, the final months of 2008 and the first few months of 2009 witnessed an ongoing campaign by AFP (and US Special Forces) troops in Basilan and Sulu, avowedly sparked by recent kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf Group, and by government accusations of MILF support and involvement as well. In early December 2008, armed skirmishes in parts of Basilan reportedly forced the residents of 17 villages (*barangay*) to flee their homes, with nearly 10,000 IDPs seeking refuge from the fighting in nearby towns.³⁰ A subsequent series of kidnappings in January and early February 2009 likewise served as the ostensible reason for a fresh round of operations by Philippine and US forces in Basilan and Sulu.³¹

According to the Philippine government's National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), there were more than 15,000 IDPs in Basilan alone as of late January 2009, mostly outside the meagre evacuation centres established by the government. By mid-February 2009, moreover, the latest wave of military operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group in areas of Basilan and Sulu had forced hundreds of families to flee. The NDCC estimated that more than 400 families were forcibly displaced in the municipality of Indanan, Sulu, alone, with nearly 2,000 people evacuated from two villages in Basilan at the same time.³² These estimates give only a small glimpse into the forced movement of local residents in the Sulu Archipelago in the midst of large-scale military operations and armed encounters between government forces and various armed Moro groups in Basilan and Sulu provinces.

4 Conclusion: Continued Conflict and Displacement?

In conclusion, the past nine months witnessed a resurgence of armed conflict in the southern Philippines, with the heightened threat and repeated practice of large-scale violence generating patterns of forced displacement of considerable scale. Conflict, violence, and displacement have been especially severe in provinces of central Mindanao, with government forces engaged in sporadic fighting with armed contingents affiliated with the MILF from mid-2008 into early 2009. At the same time, a series of highly publicized kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf Group has occasioned a renewed campaign by the AFP in areas of Basilan and Sulu provinces, generating additional casualties, destruction, and forced displacement.

The seemingly self-evident proximate causes of this resurgence of conflict have been acts of aggression by armed groups avowedly representing the minority Muslim or Moro population of the southern Philippines and/or broader aspirations associated with the promotion of Islam. Here the attacks by MILF commanders evidently launched on villages and towns in Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato in mid-2008 come to mind, as do the recent wave of

³⁰ Philippines: Battles in Basilan Worry Social Welfare Officials, *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 8 December 2008, <http://www.ucanews.com/2008/12/08/battles-in-basilan-worry-social-welfare-officials/> [accessed March 2009]; Hunt Continues Vs. Sayyaf Terrorists in Basilan Island, *Mindanao Examiner*, 9 December 2008, http://www.mindanaoexaminer.com/news.php?news_id=20081209064148 [accessed March 2009]

³¹ Basilan Gov Gives Green Light to All-Out War vs. Sayyaf, *Daily Tribune*, 17 February 2009, <http://www.tribune.net.ph/nation/20090217nat5.html> [accessed March 2009]; Associated Press, Abu Sayyaf's New Generation Threatens Philippines, 21 February 2009; Everybody Loses: Kidnappers in Sulu, Basilan Hurt Own Communities Most, *Mindanao Examiner*, 6 March 2009, http://www.mindanaoexaminer.com/news.php?news_id=20090306093258 [accessed March 2009]

³² Philippines, National Disaster Coordinating Council, *NDCC Update: Report on Armed Conflict in Sulu and Basilan in ARMM*, 12 February 2009, [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MUMA-7P95MT-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MUMA-7P95MT-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf) [accessed March 2009]

kidnappings and other atrocities reportedly committed by the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan and Sulu provinces in late 2008 and early 2009.

The ostensible backdrop for these acts of aggression on the side of the Moros, moreover, has been the campaign by Christian politicians against the Memorandum of Agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF, the restraining order and subsequent annulment of the Memorandum of Agreement by the Supreme Court, and the belated jettisoning of the agreement by the Macapagal-Arroyo administration. The story here is thus one of apparent disappointment and embitterment in the face of dashed hopes for a long-awaited peace deal, or of compromise averted in favour of a return to the prosecution of the Global War On Terror. “Hard-liners” on both sides of the Christian/Moro, government/MILF divide have prevailed over “moderates”, thus leading to a resumption of open conflict in the southern Philippines, and causing hardship, suffering, loss of life, and forced dislocation among local residents of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

For long-time observers of the Philippines, however, this kind of explanation for the violence and displacement of the past nine months in the southern provinces of the archipelago may fail to convince. After all, as noted above, the conflict in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago has never been simply one between “the government” and “Moro rebels” or “Islamist terrorists”, and the fate of successive formal “peace agreements” has always rested on the sustainability of the informal understandings on which they have remained dependent from the outset. The Philippine government is not a monolithic or coherent entity whose high-minded concern for national security is easily distinguishable from the political and pecuniary interests of its elected leaders or the police and military officers who answer to them, whether in Manila or in the municipalities and provinces of the archipelago. The MNLF, MILF, and Abu Sayyaf Group, moreover, are organizations whose aims, internal command structures, and assertions of representing Moro and Islamic aspirations in the southern Philippines are profoundly complicated and compromised by their immersion in electoral politics, accommodations with Philippine government officials, and economic activities and interests, especially in the realm of illegalities.

Viewed from this perspective, the resurgence of large-scale violence in the southern Philippines can be understood less in terms of the failure of “peace” and the resumption of “war”, and more as a set of shifts in the fluctuating terms of exchange and balance of forces among a loosely structured set of – variously competing and collaborating – political networks connecting the southern Philippines to sources of power and wealth in the national capital in Manila. With the 2010 elections looming ever larger on the horizon, the conflict, violence, and displacement of the past nine months may be symptomatic of ongoing realignments among rival clusters of political and business interests, spanning the local and national, Muslim and Christian, and “rebel” and “government” putative divides.

Seen in this light, it is difficult to discern, much less document, a definitive logic to the pattern of conflict, violence, and displacement observed in various parts of the southern Philippines since mid-2008. It is difficult, moreover, to believe that the available accounts of the conflict, supposedly pitting Moro “rebels” and “terrorists”, on the one hand, against Philippine government “security” forces, on the other, are true to the facts on the ground. Finally, it is difficult to place much trust in the precise estimates of lives lost, or families displaced, offered by various sources in the southern Philippines, given the obstacles to “objective” investigative reporting or empirically verifiable research on conditions in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago

That said, it is not at all difficult to determine that the violence perpetrated and threatened by various parties in the southern Philippines has claimed many lives, caused enormous suffering and hardship, and compelled large numbers of local residents to flee their homes and communities over the past nine months of late 2008 and early 2009. The broad outlines of the violence and of the patterns of displacement are not in doubt. Unfortunately, moreover, it must also be concluded that the prospects for the safe return home of tens, indeed hundreds, of thousands of internally displaced persons – or for the broader safety of the millions of other residents of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago – remain decidedly bleak, with further conflict, violence, and displacement all too likely to continue in the months and years ahead in the southern Philippines.

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