

# Philippines: Storm surging for Peace in Mindanao - Part 1

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## Presidential blunders and making ways forward difficult...

Serious peace builders and even ordinary citizen cannot appreciate the importance of the President Noy Aquino's not so new revelation of putting all blame of the Mamasapano fiasco in the former head of the Special Action Force of the Philippine National Police (SAF/PNP). The timing and the place or occasion where it was done made it one of the worst Presidential blunders during the period when the nation is still mourning on the January 25, 2015 failed Police operation. During this period people, especially the loved ones and relatives of the 44 murdered SAF/PNP are still seeking answers to their questions on what really happened and who really are responsible for the Mamasapano carnage.

The President made the "all blame" statement to General Getulio Napeñas when asked during the Ecumenical Celebration with the Evangelical Christians on March 9, 2015. It was also the day that the Board of Inquiry (BOI) which was created by the President himself to investigate the Mamasapano incident would have submitted its findings to the President and to the public. The BOI has called a press conference on the same day to inform the nation on the postponement and extension of the submission of the finding and the results of the investigations. In the BOI Press Conference, its head Director Benjamin Magalong had mentioned that the President did not make himself available for investigation nor made any statement. Dir. Magalong had also mentioned that General Allan Purisima- the best friend of the President- did not also give the BOI a chance to talk with him about the January 25, 2015 incident. Added to this is that the MILF/BIAF did not agree to be interviewed by the BOI.

The two abovementioned events are very revealing of the President pre-empting the findings of the BOI. Pressures could have been made to the BOI especially General Magalong- who before the press conference- was named as one of the candidates for the top position of the PNP.

Everybody has been waiting to know the results of the BOI's findings. In fact it was the reason used by the leadership of the House of Representatives to the committee which is in charge of the Mamasapano investigation that they have to postpone and wait for the BOI's results before they resume the house hearings.

Now the BOI has asked for the postponement of the submission of its findings and the President has already put all the blame to General Napeñas. Definitely not so few people would not believe the objectivity and credibility of the BOI's findings.

There are still other investigating bodies which are doing their jobs to find out the truth e.g. Department of Justice (DOJ), Commission on Human Rights (CHR), etc. It would not be helpful for these bodies to hear from the President about his escaping responsibility and accountability and his putting the blame to somebody while saving his best friend General Purisima.

What has aggravated this situation of the Presidential revelation is that, it was done on the occasion of ecumenical prayer gathering. This was the occasion initiated by the executive to gather Christian religious leaders in the country except the representative from the Catholic-Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)-which has influenced on 80% of the country's population. The gathering also excluded a leader of Catholic Charismatic group-El Shadai- whose member is one of the survivors of Mamasapano bloody encounter and had told his stories in El Shadai of what really happened in that fateful day of January 25, 2015. This ecumenical gathering was supposed to be offering of prayer for what is happening to our country not offering praises to the President. This occasion could not be one that best promotes unity amidst confusion after the January 25, 2015 incident not creating situation to further divide the country. This could be the best occasion where one accepts his limitations and would be humbled enough to accept responsibility and accountability so that other could help in correcting such human weaknesses. It is worst because, in less than two months of the successful visit of Pope Francis in the country, it seems that his message of love and compassion and peace and hope have been forgotten by no less than the President and his men and women. Definitely, it will be very difficult to start a collective healing of a nation like the Philippines if no one would accept their weaknesses, responsibilities and accountability. Besides doing the lying in a collective gathering for prayer and guidance would really turn the stomach out of the citizenry. Others would not believe that the President would go down to such lowest level of a person lying to the nation to save himself and his best friend.

### **Saving Peace or Saving lives**

Storm surging for peace and waging battles against all out war seem to be very difficult in the situation where the leadership of the country would always prefer to safely stay in their own comfort zones. They could not ever afford to be open enough to accept suggestions coming from not their considered friends.

In fact, as the situations unfolded and the Presidential blunders have exposed themselves of the real authors of choosing to have the peace talks with the MILF rather than saving the lives of the SAF/PNP who implemented the operation against Marwan. The more the President tries to save General Purisima from accountability the more people believe that since he (Purisima) was the direct line of President to Gen. Napenas and vice versa - the more it is becoming clear that Purisima had failed to make the coordination of OPLAN EXODUS (OPLAN against Marwan) with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and affected the chain of command responsibility to officer in charge (OIC) of the PNP-Deputy Director General Leonardo Espina and the Secretary Mar Roxas from the Department of Interior and Local Governance (DILG).

This major gap in the OPLAN EXODUS had affected the timely arrival of reinforcements for the 84 Airborne Assault Company of the PNP and the 55<sup>th</sup> Blocking Company of the PNP.

Signs have surfaced that made the President to disapprove the sending of the AFP and the remaining SAF to reinforce the beleaguered 84 Airborne PNP and the 55 PNP/SAF. The decision to save the peace talks with the MILF rather than the SAF/PNP came from the head of Office of Presidential Adviser on Peace Process (OPAPP) who have been denying her knowledge and involvement on the earlier part of the process of January 25, 2015, Secretary Teresita "Ging" Deles

of OPAPP contacted by members of Committee on Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) for advice. She was the one who reached out to the President to refrain from introducing reinforcement because the MILF might think that the government forces could be attacking them and might respond appropriately thus breaking up the ceasefire and ultimately the peace talks.

Another point which has unfolded in the events of the Mamasapano carnage is the fact the 84 Airborne SAF-the assaulting company had with them a human intelligence asset who did not only guide them (84 Airborne) directly to Marwan's hut but also knew very well the communities and the people there. In fact, by past experience, this human guide, must be an senior officer of the MILF who could coordinate with the different MILF base commands in the area and the BIFF and could lead the PNP/SAF (Assault and blocking companies) safety out of the area. But the sad fact here was that this human asset who knew his way around and was respected by the people in the communities was fatally shot in the early stages of the assault of Marawan's hut thus making the assault company almost blind in their retreat and their regroupment with the other SAF/PNP. The presence of an MILF officer as an asset would not be known officially within the MILF because of the sensitivity of his role with the US anit-terrorist campaign and his being part of the SAF/PNP as an agent. This is similar to Al Goshi case, only that the Mamasapano operation involved many elements of PNP/SAF while in the former only very few individual (including an MILF leader) was involved. This fact of the Mamasapano (and Al Goshi) event as revealed how deep the engagement and involvement of US counterterrorism operations have reached inside the country and especially in Mindanao.

### **Non-State and becoming State entity**

Furthermore, the Mamasapano debate has educated the peace builders and the general citizenry about the state and non-state relationships and the changes they have to undergo in the long process of dynamics in peace talks. Insights can be learned into the internal functioning of the different mechanisms which have been set up to maintain coordination and mutually agreed guidelines in the implementation of technical and substantial part of the agreement between the two parties.

The struggle of the Bangsamoro for the right to self-determination as currently lead by the MILF is directed towards the elimination of national oppression as perpetuated by the country's ruling elite and represented by the President Noy Aquino's Administration within the neo-liberal framework of capitalist led globalization.

The concrete political objective of the MILF's led struggle for self-determination is to set-up political autonomy by setting-up the Bangsamoro in a nation/state Philippines framework.

The current stage of the GPH-MILF peace talk is the setting-up of the legal foundation for the establishment of the Bangsamoro which is the Bangsamoro Basic Law and will still undergo legislative and judiciary processes and approval. Both parties had already signed peace framework agreement on October 12, 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in March 27, 2014.

The MILF has already agreed that it became part of the quasi-government instrument when it (MILF) chairs and participates in the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC), whose tasks among others is to draft the BBL to be submitted to the Philippine Congress for approval.

The GPH has provided the budget for the functioning of the BTC until today for the other tasks of the BTC which are to propose the constitutional amendment of the Philippines 1987 Constitution and to make and propose the development framework for the Bangsamoro.

Such situation puts the MILF into a transition stage from being non-state into state entity. And therefore when MILF leadership claimed that they would not appear in the government investigating bodies e.g. congress after the Mamasapano, there seems to be confusion. The MILF puts its rights rightly when it said that they are still a revolutionary organization because it has not yet signed a complete and final peace agreement with the Philippine government. This means that they (MILF) with the international implementing bodies have been satisfied with the implementation of the four annexes. Until then, the MILF can still have the full command of 35% of the fully armed BIAF. This has serious implication in the constitutional section where it says that the country will have only one armed force and one police force. But for the fulfillment of its political objective of setting the Bangsamor Entity albeit through non-armed ways, the MILF remains to be revolutionary unless the changes they want to effect to the ARMM is just superficial then they can become just like the Moro traditional politicians. But they (MILF) have to attend congressional activities like the investigation on the Mamasapano fiasco. Many people and various groups have appreciated the attendance of Mohagher Iqbal in these congressional hearings.

### **Rebuilding the trust and confidence**

Another step favorable to the continuation of the peace process is the move of the MILF to return the fire arms of the slain SAF/PNP but it should be more laudable especially for the love ones and close relatives of the murdered SAF/PNP if personals belongings e.g. cellphones, watches...should be returned as well.

Another big challenge to be hurdled by the MILF/BIAF leadership is whether to surrender their commanders who led the MILF assault which resulted to the death of the SAF/PNP to the government of the Philippines or to the international monitoring team headed by Malaysia-which is also the facilitator of the GPH-MILF peace talks. It should be very important to mention here that the Malaysian facilitator is also the current head of the Malaysia Intelligence of their Armed Forces, equivalent to the Intelligence of the AFP (ISAFP). A very difficult balancing act here should be observed. This means that the Mamasapano actual battle and dynamics and the murder of the 44 SAF/PNP should be given in the hands of the foreign government and which is not necessary neutral in the peace talks. Malaysian investors have already poured in millions of dollars in investment in Mindanao and specifically in the Bangsamoro areas. Besides, the issue of the Sulu Sultanate's claim of Sabah has not been sufficiently addressed by both the Philippine government and the MILF. The issue on foreign intervention by Malaysian government in the affairs of the Philippines even if it is in the context of facilitating peace between GPH and the MILF cannot be avoided. In fact, the assignment of the Head of Malaysian Intelligence offices as facilitator to the peace process can never be considered neutral.

At this stage, it should help a lot if both sides (GPH and MILF) will review the peace process and the current stage that they are engaged in now and from that standpoint review and manage the mess created by the Mamasapano bloody incident.

- The Mamasapano bloody encounter has created a new normal in the peace process between the GPH and MILF. It would be a big mistake for both to continue the process as if business as usual. After the process of identifying and accepting responsibility and accountability both sides have to rebuild the trust and confidence lost, especially from the peoples - the real stakeholders.
- The people (from the North to the South) have become interested with the development of the peace talks and the process and development of BBL.
- People especially the non-Muslim become worried of the nature and development of the MILF

because there are Islamic movements providing Islamic awareness and system and are becoming an emerging global phenomenon. Not few of them have fundamentalist orientations, like the ones in Africa (Boko Haram) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which projected negative images to the peoples in the country. This is the main reason why the peoples have reacted strongly when they saw the video through social media about the inhuman treatment of the MILF and the BIFF of the wounded and helpless SAF/PNP officials on the ground. Many people equated this scenario to the ISIS beheading of their helpless kidnapped victims.

- These developments should be given immediate considerations because if these are settled and trust and confidence should little by little be restored then the issue of reviewing and approving the BBL will not be difficult as it is seen today.

## **Conclusion**

With the new normal situation after the Mamasapano failed Police operation both the GPH and the MILF have to make a major review of the peace process they have journeyed together. It would be very appropriate period to take another look of the inclusivity of the nature of peace they both are trying to build in the Bangsamoro region. The current peace track they are trying to pursue is definitely not the right and appropriate one. The Mamasapano bloody incident has proven that the peace they (GPH and MILF) have tried to achieve is built in a very weak foundation and can easily be broken. The not so humbling attitude of both parties in facing and accepting suggestions and ideas made the gaps hard to fill up.

The Mamasapano unfortunate incident created an atmosphere of openness and strengthens the value of being patience to achieve goal in peace building.

Storm surging for peace simply means to pick up the pieces of the different initiatives and build durable, people centered and just peace in the Bangsamoro areas and the surrounding regions. It can only be sustainable if the people have internalized their stakeholdership in the process. Storm surging for peace can only be successfully achieved if these faster tracked efforts are implemented with unwavering determination and positive hope of the concrete realization of better tomorrow.

**Raymund de Silva**, March 12, 2015

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### **P.S.**

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