

Fighting in Southern Philippines creates humanitarian crisis

Dante Pastrana
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Fighting in the Southern Philippine city of Zamboanga between government state security forces and a small group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) members ended over the past weekend with the death and dispersal of the remaining MNLF forces. Last Friday, the Philippine military issued a statement announcing the defeat of the MNLF group. Residual MNLF members who had fled the scene, were reported as shot in coastal towns on Saturday and Sunday.

The protracted assault by government forces against the MNLF position has devastated the area and produced a humanitarian crisis.

According to the governmental National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRMC), the heavy fighting displaced 109,701 individuals, including 15,446 children under the age of 5. In the main evacuation center, the Joaquin F. Enriquez Memorial Sports Complex, 71,265 individuals are packed into just 57,500 square meters of space.

In a press statement, Luiza Carvalho, the UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator in the Philippines, warned of “a real risk of disease outbreak in the overcrowded refugee centers” where insufficient sanitation facilities have been installed.

Most of those displaced no longer have homes to which they can return. Much of the five villages of Kasanyangan, Mariki, Rio Hondo, Sta. Barbara, and Sta. Catalina, where the most intense fighting occurred, have been reduced to rubble with over 10,000 houses totally destroyed. The poverty prevalent in those communities is clearly demonstrated in the fact that the cost of property damaged amounts to barely over \$US400,000 dollars or an average of \$39 dollars for each house.

The fighting began on September 9. A planned

protest march of an estimated 200 MNLF rebels to the city hall evolved into gun battles following an attempt by government security forces to arrest a few participants who were allegedly armed. The MNLF members fled to the five villages which are populated largely by Muslims, reportedly taking 200 people hostage.

The Philippine government seized on the MNLF protest and subsequent hostage crisis to push for a military assault on the MNLF as a means of preparing for the political marginalization of the MNLF and its leader, Nur Misuari.

Government officials ordered a forced evacuation of the civilian population in the five villages and mobilized a military force of over 4,500 troops and police. Philippine president Benigno Aquino III rejected out of hand a peaceful resolution negotiated by his political rival, Vice President Jejomar Binay. Instead, after first demanding the surrender of the MNLF members, Aquino ordered an all-out assault that involved house-to-house fighting, helicopters launching rockets and soldiers firing mortars into ramshackle wooden houses.

A *Philippine Daily Inquirer* report confirms that Aquino deliberately pushed for a violent military response to the confrontation. Quoting Professor Alih Aiyub, secretary general of the National Ulama Conference, the *Inquirer* reported that the city government established a negotiations panel for the peaceful resolution of the crisis. President Aquino traveled to Zamboanga, and within hours of his arrival, shelved the negotiations. At least “seven armored personnel carriers launched an assault on Santa Catalina, sparking heavy fighting and sending residents fleeing to the city center.”

Of the MNLF group 103 have been reported killed

and 118 captured. On the government side, 20 have been reported killed and 166 wounded in the fighting. The Aquino administration has now filed charges of rebellion and crimes against humanity against Nur Misuari and 83 of his followers.

The conflict between the MNLF and the Philippine government is the direct result of the US negotiated peace settlement between Manila and the MNLF rival breakaway organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). US involvement is part of the Obama administration's so-called "pivot to Asia," including a military build-up in the region in preparation for a confrontation with rival China.

With President Aquino functioning as a leading proxy in Washington's 'pivot' to Asia, the US has been cultivating the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a local ally. To this end, Washington pushed for a political settlement in the Moro secessionist war against Manila. The final peace accord with the MILF, agreed upon in late 2012, would establish a regional sub-state, which would be able to negotiate economic ties directly with Washington.

The peace deal with the MILF rendered null the earlier 1996 peace deal concluded with Misuari and the MNLF. The Zamboanga protest and subsequent hostage crisis were the latest in a series of increasingly desperate attempts by sections of the MNLF to sabotage the government's peace deal with the MILF.

Aquino seized upon this opportunity afforded by this provocation to decimate the ranks of the MNLF, and to permanently sideline Nur Misuari, at the cost of the bombardment and devastation of a substantial portion of Zamboanga.



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