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Philippines

Mindanao, the peace process and the Mamasapano incident: the murder of peoples' democratic rights – Part 1

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More than forty days have passed after the tragic Mamasapano incident that cost not less than 67 deaths after the almost one day armed confrontations between the Special Action Forces of Philippine National Police (to arrest and neutralize international terrorists Zulkifli bin Hir alias Marwan and his Filipino associate Basit Usman) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (MILF-BIAF) and elements from Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) last January 25, 2015.

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13 March 2015

The said mission of the SAF/PNP troopers was known to the Commander-In-Chief President Aquino and the suspended PNP Director General Allan Purisima but unknown until morning of 25th January to PNP OIC Director General Leonardo Espina, Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Secretary Mar Roxas and even to the Anti-Terrorism Council Chair – Executive Secretary Paquito Ochoa and member Department of National Defense (DND) Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and according to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, they were not also informed on the said mission. Together with PNoy and Purisima are the US agents who knew and directly involved in the whole operation.

Forty days have passed and the families of the 44 slain SAF troopers, 18 BIAF combatants, not less than 5 civilians and the whole country were still mourning and asking for answers to the questions, why such avoidable tragic incident happened, who must be held accountable to bring justice to the victims.

In his two-time appearance to the national television, President Aquino continued to blame General Napenas, the relieved SAF Head of not following his orders to coordinate other law enforcing institutions on the ground and even to the GPH-MILF Ceasefire Mechanisms. To add to his statements is his cover-ups on the involvement of the suspended close friend PNP Director General Allan Purisima whom General Getulio Napenas was directly receiving orders (even Purisima is already suspended) and to whom the President himself is getting updates and briefings on the OPLAN Exodus to get Marwan and Usman.

It is now known to the general public that: Mr President has known the mission from square one including the details; Mr President allowed suspended Director General Allan Purisima to take charge of the OPLAN Exodus but he continued to save Purisima's face; Mr President has known the Mamasapano encounter as early as 5 o'clock in the morning; Mr President knew the participation of the US in the said mission; Mr President knew that for a long period terrorists like Marwana nd Usman are living in comfort in the claimed territory of the MILF; Mr President did not make action to mobilize the confused Armed Forces of the Philippines to at least intervene and save the lives or minimized the loss of lives of combatants from both sides and civilians since he is the Commander-In-Chief; and Mr President knew importantly, the mission would affect the peace process between the GPH and MILF.

Now, the Draft Bangsamoro Basic Law's passage in the Senate and Lower House of Philippine Legislature is at stake because of the said incident.

While the country has focused its attention to the investigations and the cry for justice and the opposing calls for all-out war and all-out peace, one thing has been missed here – the Democratic Rights of the Peoples to peaceful and sound environment, to free participation in all decision-making and in future defining undertakings, to be consulted and be engaged, cultures and rights shall be respected and recognized, to live and to life.

Finger Pointing

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front and its mouth pieces in the government peace panels and civil society organizations blamed the SAF/PNP of non-coordination and non-recognition of the Ceasefire Mechanisms of the Peace Process; the PNP blamed the AFP of non-reinforcement as they are just near to the clash site and have been informed thru mobile cellular phones; the PNP also raised to the MILF's misencounter stand of the incident that has taken almost thirteen hours dawn to dusk fire fights; grand standing politicians blamed PNoy and GPH Peace Panels of surrendering to the MILF's side; and PNoy blamed again and again the relieved SAF/PNP Chief Napenas.

As of 9th of March 2015, more than 72, 585 (and rising) individuals have been displaced from eleven (11) municipalities of Maguindanao province after the Armed Forces of the Philippines declared all out war against the BIFF as its retaliation to the BIFF's participation of the Mamasapano carnage. According to reports, it takes 2 Million Pesos a day to answer the IDPs' needs.

It must be accepted (not yet realized as of this writing) by the GPH and MILF sides that for more than 17 years of negotiations and signing of the Ceasefire agreement and the establishment of the instruments and mechanisms they failed to bring such mechanisms fully to the rank and file (by heart) and to the local government bodies and communities. Given that SAF/PNP failed to coordinate, why MILF local commanders were not able to hold their men and stop the fighting at least within the longest time of is two or three hours? And if and only if, the local community leaders and the whole communities were engaged and involved in these mechanisms or at least the latter has been known to them and therefore they can intervene to prevent and avoid the incident.

How about the civilians who died and were displaced? To whom shall they claim justice? Of course basic is from the Philippine government, but take note MILF also has participation to this chaos and these are their communities. The following are initially the identified failures:

1. The full participation of the civilian population to the ceasefire mechanism at the ground level. Meaning, the ceasefire mechanisms remained at the top;
2. MILF leadership has no full control over their local base commanders;
3. MILF and GPH failed to bring the whole peace process to the communities and failed to involve the mass populations and stakeholders of peace;
4. The government failed to make its anti-terrorism campaign understandable and meaningful to the lives of civilians;
5. The absence of real social, economic and political services to these communities making terrorists with resources and connections maximized the sufferings of the peoples by providing what are non-existence; and
6. The unlimited US intervention in the anti-terrorism campaign of the country.

Now, who's to blame? It is the over-all framework of the peace talks being heavy top-level making the mass population as cheerers at the sidelines and evacuees and the assumption that the parties (GPH and MILF) fully represents the whole stakeholders (which is not).

Rise of the New and Collaborationist Elites

What Peace are we building? Is Bangsamoro and Bangsamoro Basic Law synonymous to Peace? No, it is not.

Though it must be recognized the role of the peaceful negotiations between GPH and MILF to bring the national struggle of the Moro people to the national and international attention and recognition, it should not be forgotten that the main reason of the negotiation is to bring difference to the lives of the common Moro people from their current situation of politically isolated, economically deprived and socially marginalized.

This means the betterment of the lives of the broadest section of the Moro people.

Both GPH and MILF must have to offer and mutually agree on concrete, viable and sustainable programs as to what and how would be the common Moro people benefit before and after the establishment of the new Moro political entity. The case is only to open the Moro territory and vast natural and human resources (including those of Indigenous Peoples') to the salivating mouths of multi-lateral institutions like the World Bank, multi-national corporations like the plantations, foreign and local capitalists. If this is what has become of the MILF political objective, then it simply lost its meaning.

The Philippine government has to deliver its task in the international community through opening Mindanao to the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippine – East Asian Growth Agreement (BIMP-EAGA) regional integration, and the peace process closure is a requirement to this project. The peace negotiation has provided enough time for the investors and countries of interests to the natural wealth of the Moro and Indigenous Peoples territory inside the proposed Bangsamoro (ARMM right now) to position themselves and established lines to the MILF commanders and local economic and political elites for possible partnerships with or without the Bangsamoro establishment.

To make a brief review, the assertion of the Right to Self-Determination of the Moro People started in the 1900s or earlier is to gain back the full control of its economic, political, cultural and social life and future. Politically, the feudal Sultanate and Datuism would be replaced by an electoralist and bureaucratic democracy of the elite politicians in the proposed Bangsamoro. The common Moro will remain to be a voter and beggar of services from the powerful clans and old collaborationist and new elites. The common Moro people will continue to be isolated, marginalized and deprived.

Who would later enjoy the fruits? For sure it would not be the basic masses of the Moro.common Moro. It is the traditional politicians who have been already in direct contact with the investors and have full control over some territories inside the proposed Bangsamoro; It is the brave armed MILF commanders that have opportunities to meet multi-national corporations' representatives offering capital for the vast land where they he and his armed men have full control and influence; It is the Philippine and Bangsamoro government which have opened up the vast human and natural resources of Mindanao and the Bangsamoro to foreign and local capitalists.

The incumbent politicians of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have tried to prove to be different from the past administrations. But it was just for a show. The 2011 Regional election postponement was supposed to be to establish necessary reforms in preparation for the 2013 – 2016 administration and for the setting and establishing the Bangsamoro government. At first it was popular since it was also the project of the popular PNoy (because of his parents). There were investigations of ghost employees and corruptions in the ARMM agencies as exposed by Mujiv Hataman (the anointed one of Malacanang), but until today no one was held accountable and reports of corruption and ghost employees and projects have continued.

Right now, politicians are again in the front seat of the promotion and support to the peace process and the Bangsamoro government's establishment. It is only logical for them to stay in their control and influence using the nod and support from the National leadership of the country. By the establishment of the new Bangsamoro political entity, they remain in power and in full control. Not much difference.

For the peace process to go on, these supports from the elite are necessary but unnecessary to the lives of the common Moro who offered their children, husbands, brothers, wives, sisters and relatives to the struggle for self-determination. And Self-Determination does not only mean political but also economic and socio-cultural gains for the mass stakeholders of the struggle.

It is also notable in this process, that there is the mushrooming of Non-Government Organizations (NGO) among Moro tribes and professionals. In fact, if we are to roam around Cotabato City and Lanao del Sur we can certainly find many NGO offices led by the intellectuals of the Moro people. They are those articulate and well-trained to develop concepts and proposals for the foreign funding institutions that are also from the countries of huge interests over the proposed territory. These NGOs are the ones to mobilize the masses of the Moro people in public gatherings to pressure GPH and MILF to talk and talk and be true to the agreements signed which is good enough. But we cannot hear NGO organizing the masses of the Moro people to be politically empowered in order to be heard and participate fully in the discourse of the future building of social and political infrastructures. We have heard sectoral representations in public gatherings but they are only showcases and even the MILF has no strong organizational structures on the ground level. And later on, as the new political entity to be established, these intellectuals will sit in line agencies of the entity to implement and defend the interest of its government – government of the new and old Moro elites.

Why mention these? It is always necessary to look back, why there were revolutions and assertions. It is for the Moro people and not for the intellectuals, politicians and Moro Revolutionary Fronts only, again for the Moro people. And Peace Talks and peace building efforts must be in this frame.

It should also be remembered that a historical injustice cannot be corrected by making another injustice.

Imposed Inclusive Peace Can Never be Peace at All

Sections and tribes of the Moro people have been actively participating in the peace process and among other democratic venues same as to the Indigenous Peoples airing their sentiments and assertions of democratic rights to ancestral domains, sectoral representations, participation in the peace discourse among others since the beginning of the GPH-MILF talks.

Particularly for the Indigenous Peoples, learning the lessons from the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP)-Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Final Peace Agreement (FPA) giving their ancestral domains to former MNLF/BAF combatants to enter into logging and commercial concessions without them being asked or consulted. They want to make it clear enough right now in the GPH-MILF Agreements that their ancestral domains and cultural integrity shall not be compromised.

While it is true that in the Draft Bangsamoro Basic Law that there are provisions on their justice system, traditional governance and others but without their ancestral domain, where are they going to make meaningful practice of their justice and governance systems without a territory?

Even the Draft Bangsamoro Basic Law is still under debate, investors thru local politicians and local base commanders have been surveying lands for plantations and conducted soil samplings for possible mining projects inside the ancestral domains of the Indigenous Peoples earlier or post-Bangsamoro establishment. Community reports that investors were either escorted by local police, Philippine military, MILF's BIAF and or private armies of local politicians.

Worst here is the imposition of both GPH and MILF that all inhabitants in the proposed Bangsamoro territory shall be called Bangsamoro including the territories where they have not been consulted the Indigenous Peoples if they do agree and other people like the Christian population. The government of the Philippines through its Peace Panel and the Office of the President failed to protect the right of its people in the negotiating table. The MILF has to continue to

refuse and to acknowledge the history prior to the Sultanate system.

The Murder of Peoples Democratic Rights

By continuously catering to the interest of the foreign powers sacrificing the interest of the mass population, PNoy and the whole peace process will then be held accountable to the Mamasapano bloody incident and this includes the MILF. It is clear enough that prior to 2008 MOA-AD conflict up to the Mamasapano incident, foreign fundamental Islamists and the likes of terrorists Marwan and Usman have been on the comfort zones inside MILF claimed territory and even inside their camps training the BIAF and among other exchanges of technology and resources. While this is true, the Government must have already known this reality but never raised the point in the negotiating table to make it later if it is outmaneuvered as justification in the negotiation as an escape goat – a reason for the collapse blaming the MILF and now the BIFF.

Also true is the huge interests of foreign and local capitalists over the vast rich natural and human resources of the Moro and Indigenous Peoples domains. They are hungry vultures investing their resources funding the peace negotiation and community building as their entry points – wise enough (of course!). This is not after the establishment of the Bangsamoro but even prior to its creation by tapping the MILF commanders and local political clans and elites.

The Mamasapano incident, the Marwan killing and the continuing pursuit for Basit Usman and the other so-called terrorists have been used to delay the process or for some dictionary “sabotage” the process. Both MILF and GPH are to enjoy this situation since, they can continue to enjoy immunities and the pouring of supports since both are projecting as if they wanted peaceful means of solving the Moro problem.

But PNoy's continuous evasion to tell the whole truth about his knowledge and participation in the OPLAN Exodus, the BBL might suffer big difficulties in Congress. Well, the 2016 election campaign fund (Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) and Discretionary Funds –Pork-) will somehow assure BBL's passage but not as what have been written by the MILF led Bangsamoro Transition Commission. And then, the question of acceptability on the MILF's side is the problem here.

Bring those involve and have contributed to Mamasapano carnage before the bar of Justice fairly and squarely including the President himself if found accountable.

While the whole country is in anger and in opposing ends of the Mindanao complex question, there are also various questions that might be left out and flooded by the incident. Justice must be served to all victims and we have to bring into the surface the issues like the Maguindanao Massacre, continued assaults and killings of journalists, privatization of social services, neglect to agriculture and environment, casualisation and informalization of labor, corruption, migrant workers situation, unemployment, rise of massive hunger and poverty situatin, foreign interventions among others.

So?

Do not use the Moro masses as a mere audience and recipient and so as the Indigenous Peoples and Christian civilians. Get them involved essentially and value their participation from the top to bottom and vice versa.

Let us stand with the Moro people in their aspiration to achieve the real essence of Right to Self-Determination without compromising the democratic rights and welfare of the Moro masses and other peoples in the region.

March 12, 2015