

Transition Initiatives: Philippines Field Report

May - June 2000

Country Situation

Since February, the security situation in Mindanao has deteriorated. The unstable conditions threaten the positive impact made by OTI's program and other donor activities designed to support the 1996 Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Government of the Philippines (GRP) Peace Agreement. The following events have taken place since March:

- Renewed fighting between the Armed Forces of the Philippine (AFP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF);
- The kidnapping of foreign tourists by the Abu Sayyaf Muslim terrorist group;
- A series of bombings within civilian centers across Mindanao and Manila;
- Increased belligerent language used in official government statements and local press reports against Muslims;
- Inability of the press and government leaders to differentiate between the Muslim communities in conflict with the GRP and those actively pursuing peace (MILF, Abu Sayyaf, MNLF, civilians); and,
- A resurgence in Christian vigilante groups calling for a Muslim-free Mindanao.

All these events contributed to a breakdown in trust and an increase in tension between Christian and Muslim populations of Mindanao. There is a potential for a major anti-Muslim backlash if immediate action is not taken to curb the negative rhetoric and provide evidence that the GRP is delivering on the signed Peace Agreement. Official action also needs to be taken against vigilante groups. The AFP and MILF fighting has largely been contained within the following provinces: Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, North Cotabato, South Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat. However, fear and distrust permeates all of Mindanao.

In May, Mindanao-based NGOs and other groups advocating for peace in Mindanao began to mobilize. Many have called on the government to implement a cease-fire and to return to the negotiation table. On May 30, peace negotiations resumed while AFP and MILF forces continued to clash. It is yet to be determined whether the peace advocates will be successful in bringing calm back to Mindanao.

Program Highlights

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE GRANT (TAG) SUMMARY

In May, 22 grants were approved and 17 deliveries were made. The following represents the total number of grants approved and delivered under the Philippine program since June 1999:

Category	Families	Ex-Combatants	Approved TAGs	Delivered TAGs	Matching Funds (\$)	USAID Contribution (\$)
Agriculture Production	2,694	2,105	50	28	164,890	111,950
Reconciliation	0	0	4	4	7,437	3,042
Capacity Building & Media*	0	22	3	1	676	65,471
Gender and Development	369	59	6	1	11,341	11,954
Post-Harvest Facilities	9,009	6,486	159	104	490,606	350,029
Village Infrastructure	2,321	853	21	12	132,061	70,781
TOTAL	14,393	9,525	243	150	807,011	613,227

* In order not to double count beneficiaries the number of families and combatants assisted under the capacity building line are not calculated.

PROGRESS TOWARD OBJECTIVES

- **VILLAGE PARTNERSHIP.** On May 29, the Government of Philippines' Department of Agriculture (DA) confirmed that P23 million (approximately \$575,000) was released to the procurement committee established to buy agricultural machinery for the DA-OTI Village Partnership. The DA procurement committee report that a partial procurement is in process for the first tranch of equipment. The scheduled June visit of USAID Assistant Administrator for Asia, Robert Randolph will be used to inspire the DA to complete the first tranch of equipment purchases. DA Secretary Angara has agreed to conduct a joint delivery ceremony during Randolph's visit. The ability of the DA to deliver at this time will significantly demonstrate the government's commitment to uphold the 1996 Peace Agreement, despite ongoing fighting with the MILF.
- **RECONCILIATION.** Due to the fear of growing cultural intolerance and distrust between Christian and Muslim communities, OTI started developing reconciliation grants the first week of June. Reconciliation projects will provide immediate support to civil society groups promoting tolerance, understanding, and the use of negotiations to resolve the ongoing conflict. Support to identified groups will be in the form of materials for peace campaigns, rallies, forums, peace caravans, etc. (e.g. cover cost of posters, handouts, advertisement space, venues and other materials). Reconciliation grants will be used to help the disparate civil society groups to develop a more unified peace advocacy movement. The USAID Mission's democracy program assigned six staff members to assist in the development of reconciliation proposals. The first four proposals were approved and implemented by the second week of June.
- **MEDIA.** The first public service announcements (PSAs) developed with OTI funding are expected to be ready for Embassy clearance by June 20. The PSAs' intended audience is the civilian population in Mindanao, government officials in Mindanao, and government decision-makers in Manila. The PSAs will attempt to encourage cultural tolerance and understanding and a negotiated peace to the ongoing conflict.
- **EMERGENCY REHABILITATION FOR LANA O NORTE.** In response to the March fighting between MILF and AFP, OTI had forged an agreement with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to develop several emergency rehabilitation grants that would give tangible evidence that Muslim and Christian communities are willing to work together to rebuild the physical damage caused by the fighting. Unfortunately, by the end of May no

proposals were received by CRS. By June, this program element was overtaken by events and dropped.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Due to the daily change in security situation in all field locations, OTI activities have been hindered in maintaining the development and delivery rate previously achieved. For the month of May and into June the total number of approved grants and deliveries began to decline. Field staff are still penetrating most areas of operation, but scheduling of meetings and visits cannot be planned well into the future. This will continue to hinder the operations as long as active fighting continues. It is expected that the original target of 400 grants approved and delivered by the end of the program in December 2000 will not be achieved.

PROGRAM IMPACT:

Has the grassroots support provided to MNLF members under OTI's program made an impact in creating space for peace? The following indicates that the majority of the MNLF former combatants who remain armed not only are holding firm in their commitment to the 1996 Peace Agreement, but have also been serving as a peace buffer between MILF and GRP forces.

- Magsaysay, Lanao del Norte Mayor Hadji Haron Omar praised MNLF Municipal Commander Usodan Buanding for his positive interventions that helped spare the entire municipality of any incidents during the one month of fierce fighting throughout Lanao del Norte province in March and April.
- In Poona Piagapo, Lanao del Norte, MNLF leaders convinced MILF troops to vacate the area after being requested by local government officials to assist in maintaining peace and order.
- Wao, Lanao del Sur Mayor Elvino C. Balicao worked closely with MNLF leaders to disarm MILF seeking to enter municipal boundaries.
- Joint Municipal Government and MNLF checkpoints in Bumbaran, Lanao del Sur have thus far prevented fighting within that town.
- Datu Dima Ambel, MNLF State Chairman in North Cotabato Province, credited the presence of MNLF in Matalam, North Cotabato for their deterrent effect on MILF activities in the area. He cited close coordination between the MNLF and AFP units in tracking MILF movements throughout Cotabato Province. However, Ambel reported several incidents where he and his men were feeling goaded by the police. In one instance, one of his men was taken into custody by a Kabacan policeman for carrying a handgun (licensed and registered with the AFP) while traveling home from a farmers' seminar in his home village. When informed that he was MNLF and was authorized by the military to carry a handgun, the police reportedly denied acknowledging the existence of MNLF and that any Muslim with a gun was presumed to be "guilty of something" and subject to arrest on sight. This violates the 1996 Agreement, in Ambel's understanding of its contents.
- The villages of Pedtad and Pisan in Kabacan, North Cotabato have been spared any fighting due to an arrangement brokered by the MNLF commanders not to disturb peaceful development activities ongoing in the area.
- Commander Dading of the MNLF has been tapped by local government officials in Midsayap, Cotabato to mediate with MILF to prevent any attacks on the municipality.
- The MNLF villages of Sambolawan and Kapinpilan served as evacuation sites during fighting in the nearby municipality of Carmen, North Cotabato.
- Equipment storage sheds built by MNLF groups assisted by OTI have been used as evacuation centers in villages of Batulawan and Balatikan, Pikit, Cotabato. The local MNLF commanders reportedly told the MILF "if you enter this area, you'll be fighting us".
- Villages of Pigkawaran and Dado, in Alamada, Cotabato have served as buffers to protect the municipality from the entry of MILF forces. MNLF are assisting the local government in maintaining perimeter defenses along the mountainous boundary of Alamada, North Cotabato and Buldon, Maguindanao. Mayor Seneres has credited these efforts for maintaining relative peace within Alamada.
- The recent withdrawal of MILF forces from Buldon, Maguindanao that allowed the peaceful entry of AFP

troops into the municipality was brokered by MNLF officers in close coordination with local government officials.

- MNLF leaders in Parang, Maguindanao are being tapped by the AFP to advise on likely MILF movements, as well as possible facilitation of withdrawal from MILF Camp Abubakar.
- MNLF Commander Maricor intervened to prevent an MILF attack on the village of Orandang in the municipality of Parang during the recent shelling of Camp Abubakar. This action allowed civilians in Orandang to remain in their area rather than join evacuees in Parang proper.
- MNLF Camps Manicam and Mag-abo in Matanog, Maguindanao were spared from any offensive or counter-offensive attacks, instead serving as evacuation centers for civilians from neighboring villages.
- In the village of Tuka, Maguindanao, MNLF commanders Pakoting Mala and Mustapha Abdulah mediated a localized truce during a chance encounter between a group of MILF forces and AFP troops. Both sides withdrew peacefully.
- The local government, AFP, and MNLF are manning joint checkpoints in Pangilan, Bagumbayan, Sultan Kudarat province to prevent MILF from using the area as an entry-exit point for attacks from camps within the Daguma Mountain Range.
- Similar local government, AFP, and MNLF joint checkpoints are set up in village of Landang, Isulan, Sultan Kudarat. Also, MNLF Commander Alvin Sinancalan intervened to prevent a planned attack by the MILF on Sitio Karanga, Laguilayan, Isulan.
- Joint checkpoints have also been established in Tambilil, Kiamba, Sarangani at the behest of Mayor Caballero. The mayor maintains close coordination between MNLF members and the AFP.
- In the aftermath of the March incident in Kauswagan, 200 MILF troops threatened to attack village of Pangian, Glan, Sarangani. Ustadz Pendie Colano, MNLF Vice Chairman for Selatan Kutawatu State, intervened and prevented the offensive.