



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 041/2014 dated 27 February 2014

## **Peace in Mindanao: The Challenge of Disarming Rebels**

By Joseph Franco

### **Synopsis**

*A military offensive against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) reduced the threat of “spoilers” to rekindle violence. However, failing to reintegrate BIFF communities can lead to the emergence of a new generation of violent militants, posing a threat to the wider region.*

### **Commentary**

ACCOLADES FOLLOWED the 25 January 2014 signing of the Normalisation Annex between the Philippine government (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This was, after all, the last remaining hurdle before the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement.

The Annex detailed the phased decommissioning of MILF combatants, the redeployment of Philippine security forces, and the overall reduction of illicit firearms in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. Optimistic projections forecast the legislation of a Bangsamoro Basic Law by the end of 2014 and the subsequent creation of an autonomous Bangsamoro region by 2016.

### **Operation Darkhorse: a qualified success**

The far-reaching consequences of the impending peace deal attracted the attention of spoilers such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which broke away from the MILF in 2011. The BIFF purported itself as the new vanguard of the Muslim secessionist movement and pledged to continue using armed violence.

Operation *Darkhorse* was launched in 27 January 2014 by the Philippine Army in support of a police operation to arrest the leadership of the BIFF. Mechanised infantry units were able to take four BIFF camps, including their headquarters and primary IED or bomb-making facility. From a military perspective, *Darkhorse* accomplished its goal of severely damaging the BIFF's capability to wage a guerrilla campaign.

There are however, important details that may have been overlooked by some observers. Prior to the symbolic raising of the Philippine flag at the BIFF's main encampment, several media personalities invited to cover the event were wounded in an IED attack. While there had been prior IED incidents attributed to the BIFF, the 1 February 2014 explosion was the first time an attack was filmed and subsequently broadcast to a wider audience.

## Child combatants as potential militants

But aside from the BIFF's use of IEDs, the group's casualty statistics underscore a troubling trend. Of the 52 rebels killed, three were confirmed child combatants. Anecdotes from soldiers reveal how unarmed minors in BIFF uniform accompany their older male relatives into skirmishes. Once the older BIFF combatant is killed or injured, the minor picks up the weapon and presses on the fight.

Involvement by children is a recurring feature of internal conflict in the Philippines, a manifestation of what can be described as a 'vocational transference' of extremist behaviour. As in other internal conflicts, it is human and not physical geography that matters more. The BIFF's 'camps' are typical rural communities. In fact, camps of various threat groups are not demarcated by barbed wire or fencing but have diffuse boundaries - agricultural communities with hastily-built fighting positions.

Regardless of political affiliation, the homes of members of pro-government militias, secessionist movements like the MILF and the BIFF, Islamist-inspired groups such as the Abu Sayyaf, and private armed groups would often have a common feature—fortifications built from simple and often fragile resources such as compacted earth or coconut lumber. Even without an organised armed conflict, the pervasive lack of governance in Central Mindanao makes it susceptible to violence, which in turn incentivises the ownership of illicit firearms and prompts the organisation of self-defence groups.

The BIFF even has greater propensity to attract children to its campaign, considering its limited number of personnel compared to groups such as the MILF. Prior to *Darkhorse*, foreign and Philippine media have independently confirmed the disproportionate number of child combatants swelling the ranks of the BIFF. Contrary to the experience of child soldiers in Africa and Latin America, there is a distinct lack of coercion for the recruitment of young combatants in Mindanao.

Prior to the peace process, succeeding generations in MILF communities would join the secessionist movement. Membership in armed groups is an ubiquitous event, an attractive vocation for young men with limited socioeconomic prospects. Children are raised in an environment where firearms are plentiful and are passed on from older male relatives as heirlooms.

## Consequences of failed normalisation

The greatest risk is for this generation of BIFF child combatants to grow older and more radical. The dismantling of BIFF communities could only serve to diffuse latent resentment for the Philippine government and the prospective Bangsamoro - a conflict ready to ignite once infused with ideological motive. The Normalisation Annex intends to prevent this, by guaranteeing the "pursuit of sustainable livelihood", "political participation", and a "peaceful deliberative society".

The critical step is to diminish the amount of illicit weapons in Mindanao and disincentivise the use of violence. Even with the disbandment of organised armed groups, the resulting glut of weapons would find its way into the illicit small arms trade. This dynamic would be accelerated if promised improvements to livelihoods do not materialise. Alongside economic well-being, political arrangements and institutional arrangements must be in place to create meaningful autonomy to the Bangsamoro.

Failure to pursue normalisation poses consequences not only to the Philippine peace process but to the wider Southeast Asian region. Rifles from the military and handguns from the Philippine National Police had found use in sectarian conflict in Poso, Indonesia. The 2001 Jemaah Islamiyah plot to bomb foreign missions in Singapore was also facilitated by the conflict in Mindanao - as a place to procure explosives like ammonium nitrate and firearms.

Moreover, the existence of latent extremists, child combatants grown up, could create enclaves untouchable to authorities. This is not without precedent in Central Mindanao, which for years played host to a Jemaah Islamiyah training camp, until its destruction in 2005. These areas are contiguous to the locations of BIFF communities.

It is not too far-fetched to see a future where violent ideologues could either buy or recruit the services of former child combatants who fail to reintegrate into mainstream society. The apparent proficiency of the BIFF in using IEDs compared to other Philippine threat groups constitute an attractive skill set for other violent extremists seeking to enhance their capability to launch attacks.

In short, the infusion of a violent extremist ideology to previously un-ideological but nonetheless experienced combatants can create a potent mix that can destabilise the Southeast Asian region.

*Joseph Franco is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*