

Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Southern Philippines: A Discourse on Self-Determination, Political Autonomy and Conflict Resolution

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The Philippines, like many of the third world countries in Southeast Asia, is now seriously confronted with problems related to their ethnic and religious minority populations. As a multi-cultural state, one of her major problems is how to forge unity and cooperation among the various ethnic groups in the country. The Bangsamoro (Muslim Filipinos) people, one of these minority groups, have been struggling for their right to self-determination. Their struggle has taken several forms ranging from parliamentary to armed struggle with a major demand of a regional political autonomy or separate Islamic State.

The Bangsamoro rebellion, popularly known as the Mindanao conflict, is a deep-rooted problem with strong historical underpinnings that can be traced as far back as the colonial era. It has persisted up to the present and may continue to persist as well as threaten the national security of the Republic of the Philippines unless appropriate solutions can be put in place and accepted by the various stakeholders of peace and development.

This presentation will highlight the following: 1) Demographic background, contesting claims and ethnic relations in southern Philippines; 2) How the Bangsamoro people become part of the Philippine Republic; 3) The Bangsamoro Secessionist Movement; 4) Toward establishing political autonomy and conflict resolutions in Mindanao; and 5) Bishops- Ulama Forum as venue for an inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

1. Demographic Background, Contesting Claims, and Ethnic Relations in Southern Philippines

Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan, until their incorporation into the Philippine Republic and the subsequent arrival of the Filipino migrant settlers from Luzon and the Visayas in 1912 and thereafter, have always been the ancestral homelands of more than thirty (30) ethnolinguistics groups. Thirteen (13) of these indigenous groups are the composite of the Bangsamoro people which include the Badjao, Molbog (or Melebugnon), Iranun, (also

known as Ilanun), Palawani, Jama –mapun, Sama, Kalagan, Sangil, Kalibugan, Tausug, Maguindanao, Yakan, and the Maranao. The others now popularly refer to themselves as Lumad (non-Muslim and non-Christian indigenous tribes) of Mindanao.

Today however, the population of the region can be divided into three (3) general categories, namely: the Bangsamoro people; the Lumad tribes of Mindanao and the Filipino Christian migrants settlers.

The Bangsamoro people (the Muslim Filipinos) constitute about only 20% of the entire population of southern Philippines. They are dominant only in the five provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao del sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, and also in some municipalities of Cotabato, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga del Norte and Davao del Sur. There are high concentrations of them, too, in Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Zamboanga del Sur and Palawan. The Lumad groups constitute approximately 5% of the entire population of the area.

The Filipino Christian migrant settlers mostly originated from Luzon and the Visayas. They came to southern Philippines starting the second decade of the 20th century through the encouragement of the American colonial government, and later, of the Philippine Republic. Most of them though came on their own. The settlers dominated Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan except in the five provinces considered as the present Bangsamoro homeland. In fact, they constitute 75% of the total population of the region.

A strange mix of colonialism and religion has brought the Bangsamoro, the Lumads and the Christian Filipino settlers together in southern Philippines. The historical experience which saw the 333 years of Spanish-Moro war was characterized by the misuse of religious beliefs for colonial objectives that left behind the seeds of conflict that continue to affect the relationship of the present-day inhabitants of the region.

Among the Bangsamoro people, there seems to be a popular and common perception that the conflict in southern Philippines was brought about by the coming of the settlers, the Christian Filipinos. It was the settlers who had helped the Spaniards during the said war. It was the settlers who drove them away from their ancestral lands. It was the settlers who fought against them starting from 1970s up to the present. It was the settlers who served as strong hindrance to their right to self-determination in the Mindanao.

In the minds of the Christian Filipino settlers, living with the Bangsamoro is living in fear and insecurity. Some of the most common attributes that the settlers gave the Bangsamoro were traitors, kidnapers, land grabbers, terrorists, troublesome and warlike. This predicament must have contributed much to the war in the 1970s and the 1980s as well as the current hostilities in southern Philippines .

On the other hand, common among the Lumads was the tendency to blame, among others, the Bangsamoro and the Christian settlers as the primary causes of the Mindanao conflict. The Bangsamoro and the Christian settlers alike drove them away to the top of

the mountains. Both are troublemakers and warlike people. Both refuse to recognize their rights over the vast lands in Mindanao as their ancestral domain.

The reality in southern Philippines, there had not been a period of complete healing and eradication of biases and prejudices. Mutual apprehension and insecurities among people in dealing with one another remain so strong and alive today.

In addition to the complexities given by this demographic situation and the diverse nature and relationships among these people, the Philippine government also has to deal with these three vital issues. These are the struggle for self-determination of the Bangsamoro people as articulated by the Bangsamoro secessionist groups; of the Lumad's assertion to a rightful ancestral domain and identity within the region; and of the need of the country to move forward and make southern Philippines a land of peace and prosperity.

The Mindanao conflict is crucial problem of the Philippine government. It is threatening to tear the country apart. This conflict is also very dangerous not only to the wellbeing of the Bangsamoro and the entire Filipino people but also to the security of the neighboring Southeast Asian countries as well.

2. How did the Bangsamoro People Become Part of the Present Republic of the Philippines?

On July 4, 1946, the United States of America restored political independence to the Filipino people, conveniently overlooking the statehood of the two Bangsamoro (Muslim) sultanates. The incorporation of the two sultanates in southern Philippines into the Philippine Republic was done without the benefit of democratic consultation on whether or not the majority of the Bangsamoro people would want to join the new republic as individual citizens or as sultanates. This was arbitrarily imposed upon them despite the repeated calls of some Bangsamoro leaders to oppose the incorporation of their homeland into the Philippine territory and sovereignty.

A case in point was the incident on March 18, 1935. One hundred twenty Bangsamoro datus of Lanao came up with the historical document popularly known as the "Dansalan Declaration". This statement expressed to the U.S. colonial government their desire to be excluded from the proposed "independence" to be granted to the Filipinos in the North of the archipelago. This declaration is perhaps unmatched in its clarity:

"...we do not want to be included in the Philippines for once an independent Philippines is launched, there would be trouble between us and the Filipinos because from time immemorial these two peoples have not lived harmoniously together. Our public land must not be given to people other than the Moros..."

(Philippine Muslim News (Manila), Vol.2, No.2, July 1968, pp.7-12).

Furthermore, the declaration warned to wit: "We foresee what conditions we and our children will be in". These conditions, the declaration predicted, will have been

characterized by unrest, suffering and misery. Desperate, or whatever their reasons were, the Bangsamoro leaders expressed preference for continued U.S. colonial rule in Mindanao if they could not be granted their separate independence simultaneously. (Philippine Muslim News, July 1968, p, 11).

One Bangsamoro datu said in a meeting in Zamboanga that when it comes to union with Filipino people, although he is already old, he would still fight to oppose such a plan (Gowing, 1977, pp.151-152). These protests were however, ignored by the U.S. colonial government.

The U.S. colonial government was, in short, principally responsible for the Bangsamoro and the Muslim sultanates' becoming part of the present day Republic of the Philippines.

The restoration of the Philippine independence did not improve the socio-economic conditions of the Bangsamoro. The Philippine government continued to pursue the same socio-economic colonial policies in Mindanao.

One can mention, for instance, the multinational corporations' extensive control and monopoly of Mindanao economy, particularly in the export of pineapple, banana, rubber, sugar cane, and others (Tadem, 1980). The banana industry in Mindanao alone covered 27,000 hectares of land wholly controlled by foreign U.S. multinationals engaged in agribusiness. As of 1975, 20,000 hectares were in the hands of three U.S. corporations. Dole had 9,000 hectares; Del Monte owned 6,588; and Tadeco had 4,500. At present, Del Monte owns the world's biggest pineapple plantation with a total of 36,000 acres of land in Mindanao (Ahmad, 1980, p.21).

In addition to this, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Philippine government promoted migration to southern Philippines because of its fertile land and its tremendous abundance of other natural resources in the region. This policy was encouraged in order to solve the agrarian problem in Luzon and the Visayan areas. Specifically, under the famous Magsaysay administration, several resettlement programs like the National Authority for Reforestation and Rehabilitation Administration (NARRA), Land Settlement and Development Corporation (LASEDECO), Economic Development Corporation (EDCOR) and others gave way to massive migration from the northern Philippines to Mindanao. As a result of the steady influx of the new migrant settlers, the Filipino Christian migrant settlers finally outnumbered the original Bangsamoro and the Lumad indigenous inhabitants of southern Philippines. In the succeeding years, other Christian migrant settlers followed in massive and uncontrolled migration until they dominated the socio-economic and political life in Mindanao (Lomongo, 1988, pp.10-11). This eventually resulted to the increasing marginalization and underdevelopment of the Bangsamoro and the Lumads.

3. The Bangsamoro Secessionist Movement

The Bangsamoro's resentment over the loss of their political sovereignty, ancestral land and economic resources were expressed occasionally from 1914 to 1940 in minor incidents(Gowing, 1979,pp.164-198).In the 1960's these minor incidents were transformed into systematic opposition. Illustrating this is the introduction of a bill in 1961, by Congressman Ombra Amilbangsa of Sulu granting and recognizing the political independence of the province of Sulu. In his explanatory note he mentioned, "This bill proposes the grant and recognizes the independence to the province of Sulu, the government of the Republic of the Philippines will have withdrawn and surrendered all rights of possession, supervision, jurisdiction and control as well as sovereignty now existing and exercised by the Republic of the Philippines in and over the territory of the province of Sulu."(House Bill5682, House of Representatives, 1961).

The Muslim Independence Movement (MIM)

The Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) was organized in 1968. It called for the outright secession of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan regions from the Philippine control. It also called for a jihad (holy war) to defend the Bangsamoro homeland. The word "Muslim" was replaced with "Mindanao" in order to accommodate inhabitants in southern Philippines who were non-Muslims.

The following are the major reasons cited by the leadership of the MIM in agitating for secession:

1. The establishment of the provincial and municipal governments undermined the status of the traditional leaders, dislocated the authority and communications set up, and negated the existing coalition formation patterns, so necessary in the cooperative and communal ventures that the Muslims were accustomed to. In operation, these governments were disruptive and not functional.
2. The imposition of a new legal system negated the judicial functions of the village elders. This caused a breakdown in social order and give rise to a lot of social problems which exist up to this day.
3. It was in the field of education where irreparable dislocations were created. The public school organization systematically alienated the school children. They were forced to learn new sets of values that put down the cultural milieu in which they grew, and
4. The transportation of settlers and land grabbers to Muslim provinces and the creation of agricultural colonies out of Muslim lands caused a lot of resentment in Muslim circles. In effect, this reduced the economic base of the Moroland.(Glang,1971,pp.91-92).

Datu Udtog Matalam, the founder of the MIM, has clearly defined his stand on justice in the Philippines as it affects the Muslims:

“The Philippine government has utterly failed in the administration of justice in Muslim-land, that the present constitution of the Philippines has not provided for the observance of their personal laws based upon their shariah and Adat laws.”(Glang,1971,p.92).

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

In 1972, barely two months after the declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front—Bangsamoro army hit the news with well-coordinated attacks against several detachments of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Sulu, Cotabato and Lanao provinces. This was followed by a full-scale war in southern Philippines.

The ultimate goals of the MNLF are complete liberation of the Bangsamoro people and the independence of Mindanao. Its claim to a national homeland is primarily through armed struggle. It bannered the Bangsamoro national identity. What is desirable is the establishment of no less than a Bangsamoro Republic. The basis of this new phase of the Bangsamoro struggle is summarized in a two-paragraph manifesto dated April 28,1974:

“We, the five million oppressed Bangsamoro people, wishing to free ourselves from the terror, oppression, and tyranny of Filipino colonialism, that had caused us untold sufferings and miseries by criminally usurping our land, by threatening Islam through wholesale desecration of its places of worship and its Holy Book, And murdering our innocent brothers, sisters and folks in genocidal campaign of terrifying magnitude...Aspiring to have the sole prerogative of defining and chartering our national destiny in accordance with our own free will in order to ensure our future and that of our children...”(MNLF Manifesto, April 28, 1974).

Asani, spokesman of the MNLF mentioned that:

“...Colonialism is the root cause of the Moro problem in the southern Philippines- a phenomenon that is not after all an exclusive preoccupation of Western nations. The present fighting in the area may be a fight against established but repressive government. The issue therefore is essentially political in character. Hence it requires primarily a political solutions; which call for the thorough restructuring of the prevailing Filipino-Bangsamoro relations,”(Asani,1986).

This restructuring means, according to the MNLF spokesperson, the secession of the Bangsamoro people from the Philippine Republic. As they saw it, the only way to regain

the full expression of their right to self-determination, freedom and independence is the establishment of a Bangsamoro Republic.

The MNLF, however, has reduced its demand to a “genuine political autonomy” in Mindanao within the realm of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippine Republic. This can be gleaned from the Tripoli Agreement signed on December 23, 1976 and the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement by the Philippine government and the MNLF, under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Fragmentation of the MNLF and the Rise of the MILF

The signing of the Tripoli Agreement led to the fragmentation of the MNLF. A rival organization emerged in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), organized by the former vice-chairman of the MNLF Central Committee, Hashim Salamat. The MILF started to influence and recruit MNLF members to their ranks. In 1977 the MILF leadership cited the following reasons for breaking up from the MNLF:

1. The MNLF leadership was being manipulated away from the Islamic basis, methodologies, objectives and fast evolving towards Marxist-Maoist orientations.
2. The Central Committee has evolved into mysterious, exclusive, secretive and monolithic body whose policies, plans and decisions-political, financial or strategic, become and exclusive preserve of Chairman Nur Misuari.
3. The mysterious exclusive and arrogant of the MNLF leadership resulted in confusion, suspicion and disappointment among members.

Initially, the MILF was calling for the establishment of a Bangsamoro Islamic State in southern Philippines that in effect, called for secession and also emphasized that “Islam will be the ideology of the new front and called for the Islamization of the Bangsamoro society.” However in 1985, Hashim Salamat advocated autonomy as the minimum objective of the MILF. He mentioned:

“...Our concept of self-determination is complete independence, or at least, a meaningful autonomous government embracing the traditional homeland of the Bangsamoro, namely, Mindanao, Palawan, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.”(Hashim, 1985).

The break up of the MNLF into two major factions followed two major ethnic groupings and divided Mindanao in terms of territory. The MNLF under Nur Misuari found loyalty among the Tausug in Western Mindanao in the Bangsamoro populated areas of Lanao del Norte down to Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan, mostly traditional followers and territories of the Sulu Sultanate. Hashim Salamat on the other hand, found loyalty among the Maguindanaos in Maguindanao province and later Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte and Zamboanga provinces, the traditional territories of the Maguindanao Sultanate.

4. Towards Establishing Political Autonomy: Some Negotiated Initiatives for Conflict Resolutions in southern Philippines

At first, the Philippine government applied strong military pressure, intimidation and terror tactics against the Bangsamoro secessionist groups in order to neutralize their resistance. The Bangsamoro secessionist groups however, confronted the government forces with a strong and organized armed resistance which resulted to a full-scale-war in Mindanao starting in 1972.

From 1972 up to the present, the Bangsamoro struggle has been officially addressed to organization of all the Islamic states from which the Bangsamoro armed secessionist groups gained attention, sympathy and support. Eventually this captured international attention. So that in 1976, after having suffered serious set backs caused by the Bangsamoro rebellion and experienced economic and diplomatic pressures exerted by the OIC, especially after Libya intervened and rallied behind the MNLF, the Philippine government finally decided to negotiate with the MNLF.

In December 23, 1976, the Philippine government and the MNLF signed the historic Tripoli Agreement. This agreement marked the beginning of the Philippine government's peaceful and negotiated initiatives to the Mindanao conflict by granting political autonomy to the Bangsamoro people within the realm of national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippine state. The proposed areas of autonomy embraced the 13 provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, South Cotabato, Davao del sur, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, and Palawan and the cities and villages situated in the above-mentioned areas.

Nevertheless, the Tripoli Agreement, which was supposedly the first major peaceful initiative taken by the Philippine government to establish autonomy for the Bangsamoro people, was not fully implemented. The two sides failed to agree on the mechanics of its implementation. Instead, the Philippine government instituted its own version of autonomy by establishing two Autonomous Governments in Regions IX and XII.

The MNLF has rejected the establishment of the establishment of the two autonomous governments and demanded for the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement while continuing their armed struggle because they felt that so-called autonomous governments are not really autonomous.

The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)

Pursuant to the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the Aquino government established the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao. The ARMM includes the five provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, and the City of Marawi. comprising more or less 12,000 square kilometers, approximately 4 percent of the

Philippine total land area. The government considered this political initiative as the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement.

The MNLF and the other Bangsamoro armed groups refused to recognize this political action of the government and instead return to armed struggle. Similarly, the OIC has rejected the ARMM and supported the MNLF by urging the Philippine government to implement the Tripoli Agreement.

In 1996, after almost four years of peace negotiations, the Ramos administration and the MNLF signed a peace agreement at Malacanang Palace, Manila. This was proudly described by both sides as “the final agreement on the implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement” between the MNLF and the GRP with the participation of the OIC. As a result of this of this autonomy agreement, former MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari became the head of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development and the Governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.

At present, the ARMM has had a very mixed record. While it successfully bring peace with the MNLF and the government, the war in Mindanao continued with the other Bangsamoro armed groups, the MILF and the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf and there is still an extremely heavy military presence in the region. Although there were 7,500 MNLF mujahideen integrated into the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police as part of the autonomy agreement, there are still many MNLF fighters who joined the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf and others even engaged in banditry.

There have been no substantial changes brought about by the ARMM on the socio-economic status of its citizens. It can be understood partly because of the continuing war in the region but not few among the people in the area blame the failure of the MNLF leadership in delivering the basic services to the people. The region is as impoverished and strife-torn as it was in 1996, and remains the poorest region in the country (Abuza, 2003, p.42).

Ironically, in November 2001, Misuari who became the governor of the ARMM after the 1996 Peace Agreement renewed his rebellion by ordering his followers to attack military camps in Jolo, Sulu. After this aborted rebellion, he abandoned his post as governor of the ARMM and escaped to Sabah, Malaysia where he was arrested by the Malaysian police officers and later deported to Manila. He is now still in incarceration at Sta. Rosa, Laguna while awaiting his trial for rebellion charges against him.

The GRP-MILF Peace Negotiations

Even before the ink that was used to sign the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement could dry up, rebel stronghold of another Bangsamoro armed group, the MILF, started to make their presence be felt and intensified their activities in preparation for another war in Mindanao. For instance, from December 3 to 5, 1996, the MILF organized the so-called Bangsamoro People’s Assembly in Cotabato City in order to show their strength and

mass supports. During the said assembly, the MILF declared its non-recognition of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Accord and their commitment to the establishment of the Bangsamoro Islamic State in Mindanao instead of merely political autonomy. After the assembly followed a heavy fighting in Buldon, Maguindanao between the AFP and the MILF which resulted to more a hundred dead and thousands of refugees. The war continue up to the present, however, the Arroyo government is pursuing a peace negotiation with MILF. The GRP and the MILF interposed that autonomy is still the viable solution to the ongoing conflict in southern Philippines that is most acceptable to the Bangsamoro people. How this autonomy arrangement would differ from the MNLF-GRP negotiated autonomy? We do not know yet, but many are hoping for its eventual realization and implementation.

The Pulsating Mess of the Abu Sayyaf to the Mindanao Peace Process

One of the major obstacles to the understanding of the Mindanao conflict that complicated the Mindanao peace process is the terrorism and lawless activities of the Abu Sayyaf (ASG).

The ASG was founded by Abdurajak Janjalani in the early 1990s. It was initially called the Harakatul Islamia that was later changed to Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword). The principal objective of the ASG is the creation of Independent Islamic State in Mindanao similar to the MILF aspiration. However, the ASG has become notorious in Mindanao and beyond particularly during the burning of the town center of Ipil, Zamboanga del Sur in 1995. The event was labeled the most serious terrorist attack initiated by the ASG. The group somewhat mellowed down towards the last year of the Ramos administration, especially after the death of Janjalani (Mercado, 2000,p.19).

In early 2000s, the ASG resurfaced anew under the leadership of the younger Khaddafy Janjalani in Basilan and the former MNLF Commander Robot in Sulu province. The group intensified their criminal and lawless activities by conducting a series of kidnapping and hostage taking. Among these are the kidnapping of school children, teachers, school principal and Fr. Rhoel Gallardo, CMF, Director of the Claret High School in Basilan; the hostage-taking of foreign tourists in Sipadan, Sabah in Malaysia; and the Dos Palmas Resort of Western Palawan where 20 hostages including foreigners were taken. These incidents made the ASG an international terrorist group (Mercado, 2000, p.19).

Incidentally, the ASG was considered by the U.S. President Bush as one of the terrorist groups linked to Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda International Terrorist Network that was allegedly responsible for the September 11, 2001 attack that ruined the World Trade Center in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. This allegation is premised on the suspicion that the leadership of ASG especially Janjalani was trained in the Middle East military camp and received assistance from Osama bin Laden.

The MILF has been suspected as connected with ASG because it was said that the ASG use to espouse similar aspirations with the MILF, the establishment of an Independent Islamic State in Mindanao.

The MILF however, and the MNLF for that matter, strongly denied any connections with the ASG. In fact, the leadership of both secessionist groups especially the religious ones, have openly condemned the lawlessness and the criminal activities of the ASG such as kidnapping and hostage-taking. They considered these activities as “un-Islamic” and “disservice” to Islam.

The criminal activities, such as kidnapping, hostage-taking as well as the brutal killing of Christian priest, Fr. Gallardo, has contributed tremendously to the isolation of the Bangsamoro and the polarization of the Muslim-Christian population in Mindanao. These may have resulted to the further perpetuation of the historical anti-Muslim sentiments of the Christians and vice versa, in Mindanao.

Indeed, the ASG contributed so much to muddle the already complex issues involved in the Mindanao conflict. They also made the Mindanao peace process very difficult to conclude successfully.

Currently, there are two popular perceptions among the Filipino people including those from the top military and civilian leaderships of the country. First, the over-simplistic view of the issue involved in the Mindanao conflict and the tendency to solve it with an easy-to-fix solution. What make this perception very dangerous is that, to many, the easy-to-fix solution is military option to this centuries-old problem. Second is the general tendency of many to lump all the Bangsamoro people into one basket and consider them all terrorists. This view dangerously set aside the legitimate aspirations of the Bangsamoro people such as socio-economic and political demands that they have been fighting for since the colonial era.

5. The Bishops-Ulama Forum

Some civil societies and religious institutions have taken initiatives in the promotion of peace and harmony in southern Philippines. The impact of the raging war between the Bangsamoro secessionist groups and the Philippine government has brought the realization that the search for peace in the region is the task not only of the armed groups of the Bangsamoro and the Philippine government but should be the collaborative effort of the various civil societies, religious and academic institutions in the region. However, this presentation would only highlight the activities of the Bishops-Ulama Forum.

The Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF) was established on July 16, 1996. It is now the leading institution in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues in Mindanao. It is presently composed of all the bishops from the catholic and protestant churches in Mindanao and the Ulama from the Ulama League of the Philippines. Recently this forum is planning to include in its composition the religious leaders from the Lumad indigenous communities, however, there are some from Ulama group who are not willing to welcome them into the

forum because they are not people of the book, since they are still practicing their traditional religious belief system.

The BUF was organized by the Mindanao Catholic bishops and the Ulama League of the Philippines in reaction to the 1996 Peace Agreement. Both sides emphasized the importance of peace and development notwithstanding religious affiliation and called for dialogues among religious groups.

The Office of the Secretariat of the Bishops-Ulama Forum is located in Iligan City, Philippines. Among its major activities are the monthly regular meetings of the Bishops and Ulama and the conduct of a series of culture of peace seminars among educators, lay and religious workers, youth, administrators of schools and universities in southern Philippines.

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