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# SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

In 2003 the U.S. Department of State asked the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to undertake a project to help expedite a peace agreement between the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF has been engaged in a rebellion against the GRP for more than three decades, with the conflict concentrated on the southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. This report highlights USIP activities in the Philippines from 2003 to 2007. It describes the conflict and its background, the substance of ongoing negotiations, USIP efforts to “facilitate” the peace process, and insights on potentially constructive steps for moving the Philippine peace talks forward. It concludes with a few lessons learned from USIP’s engagement in this specific conflict, as well as general observations about the potential value of a quasi-governmental entity such as USIP in facilitating negotiations in other conflicts.

G. Eugene Martin was the executive director of the Philippine Facilitation Project. He is a retired Foreign Service officer who served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Manila. Astrid S. Tuminez served as the project’s senior research associate. She is a senior fellow at the Southeast Asian Research Center, City University of Hong Kong, and was formerly director of research for alternative investments at AIG Global Investment Corp., and a program officer in Preventing Deadly Conflict at Carnegie Corporation of New York.

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.**

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## CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Historical Background                                       | 2  |
| USIP’s Engagement   | 4  |
| PFP Activities  | 5  |
| Operational Difficulties in Facilitating Peace Negotiations | 10 |
| Obstacles to Peace in Mindanao                              | 12 |
| USIP’s Facilitating Contributions                           | 13 |
| PFP and U.S. Policy in Mindanao                             | 14 |
| Conclusion  | 16 |
| A New Tool of Diplomacy                                     | 18 |
| Appendices  | 19 |

*G. Eugene Martin and Astrid S. Tuminez*

## Toward Peace in the Southern Philippines

### A Summary and Assessment of the USIP Philippine Facilitation Project, 2003–2007

#### Summary

- The Muslim inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines, known as Moros, have resisted assimilation into the Christianized national culture for centuries. Since Spanish colonial times, Moros have been marginalized from Philippine society, politics, and economic development. Moro-dominated areas have suffered from the effects of war, poor governance, and lack of justice. High crime rates, internal clan-on-clan conflicts, and corruption and abuse by local leaders also beset Moro communities. For nearly four decades, Moros have rebelled against the Philippine government and sought self-determination. The rebellion was led first by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and then by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). In 2003, the U.S. State Department, seeking to prevent international terrorist groups from exploiting the conflict in the Philippines, engaged the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to facilitate a peace agreement between the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF. The State Department felt that the Institute’s status as a quasi-governmental, “track one-and-a-half” player would allow it to engage the parties more broadly than an official government entity could. To accomplish its mandate, USIP launched the Philippine Facilitation Project (PFP).
- PFP faced many difficulties at the outset. The Malaysian government had served as host and facilitator of the GRP-MILF peace talks since 2001 and opposed an American presence at the negotiating table. Moros suspected USIP’s presence, motives, and relationship with the U.S. government. USIP, lacking a permanent base in Mindanao, also faced challenges in establishing strong channels of communication with the GRP, MILF, and civil society. Multiple changes in the composition of the GRP negotiating team, and divergent perspectives and agendas within the Moro leadership and communities further complicated the peace facilitation effort. At times, senior GRP officials’ lukewarm support for an equitable and effective peace agreement hampered

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The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress.

Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote post-conflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict-management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

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the efforts of skilled and committed negotiators. Corruption and criminality among the Moros, exacerbated by centuries-old clan loyalties, created other hurdles.

- Despite the challenges, USIP managed to build productive relationships with both the GRP and the MILF, helped the parties come up with creative solutions to stubborn issues of ancestral domain, and started dialogue between disparate Moro ethnic groups. PFP's multifaceted approach included directly sharing lessons learned by principals from other conflict areas around the world; training civil society leaders in conflict management; promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation via the Bishops-Ulama Forum; supporting the training of Mindanao history teachers on teaching a historical narrative that is more inclusive of the Moro experience; and launching dialogue among young Moro leaders. To improve media coverage of the conflict, PFP held two training workshops for media representatives. It also conducted six workshops on conflict management, negotiation, and communication for Philippine military officers.
- Through its activities, USIP introduced concepts and approaches that were useful to both government and MILF peace panels. It helped inform the Philippine population, and elites in Manila in particular, of issues underlying the conflict in Mindanao, while presenting potentially viable means of resolving them. The Institute's efforts have added marginally to more balanced media coverage. USIP funding supported the publication of policy papers, which were distributed to scholars, analysts, journalists, and policymakers. USIP also sponsored educational materials for use in Philippine schools.
- Philippine economic progress and U.S. counterterrorism objectives will remain precarious until the Mindanao conflict is resolved. The roots of conflict in Mindanao are primarily political, not economic or religious. Preference for military "solutions" will likely miss the delicate nuances of intergroup conflict and could even worsen the situation. To move the peace process forward, U.S. policymakers must give higher priority to the GRP-MILF negotiations and commit to working with both parties long enough to reach an agreement and implement it. The Philippine government, for its part, will need to muster the political will to address Moro grievances more effectively, especially on land claims, control over economic resources, and political self-governance. When an agreement is reached, implementation will require long-term monitoring by a committed international body. Today's complex diplomatic landscape increasingly requires new tools and techniques of conflict management, including quasi- and non-governmental actors, to accomplish U.S. foreign policy goals. Because of its ability to deal with nonstate actors and sensitive issues underlying civil conflict, USIP can be a useful instrument for advancing U.S. interests.

## Historical Background

The island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago in the southern Philippines constitute the Philippines' most politically troubled region. U.S. colonial policies in the early twentieth century planted some of the seeds of future conflict in this region, between the Muslim minority, popularly known as Moros, and the Philippine government.<sup>1</sup> American military power, succeeding where Spanish colonialists failed, conquered the centuries-old Islamic sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu and incorporated them into the Philippine Commonwealth. Ignoring Moro appeals for separate status based on their religious and cultural differences with the majority Christian Filipino population, Washington granted independence to a unified Philippine state in 1946. After independence, Manila continued Spanish and American colonial policies of integrating and assimilating Moros into the majority Christian and Hispanicized culture. Millions of Christian Filipinos were resettled onto Moro lands. Over roughly six decades, from 1913 to the early 1970s, Moros became a political, demographic, and landowning minority on territory they had dominated for centuries. The Moros' inability to protect their culture and way of life, along with the Moro

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elites' discontent over political disenfranchisement, fueled a violent rebellion and calls for independence in the early 1970s.

The beginnings of the current conflict hark back to 1968, when a massacre of Moro recruits in the Philippine army, combined with other factors, triggered the formation of the MNLF.<sup>2</sup> Full-scale war with the government followed in the early 1970s, interrupted by a peace agreement in 1976. But the 1976 agreement failed to address Moro grievances, and intermittent clashes between Moro forces and the army continued for the next two decades. In 1996, after lengthy negotiations facilitated by Indonesia and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the GRP and the MNLF signed a "Final Peace Agreement."<sup>3</sup> Heralded as a breakthrough, the agreement gave MNLF leaders the chance to govern several Moro-majority provinces within the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). However, an Organic Law later passed by the Philippine congress to implement the agreement weakened many of the concessions given by the executive branch to the MNLF. MNLF leaders, for their part, proved to be ineffective stewards of the ARMM and had little positive impact on Moro lives.<sup>4</sup> Today the MNLF is split into factions, with many of its leaders continuing to assert that the government has not complied fully with the terms of the 1996 agreement. Some factions threaten to resume rebellion if their grievances are not addressed.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is a group that formally split from the MNLF in the early 1980s, advocating a more Islamic-identity-based approach to the Moro struggle. Led by Islamic scholar Salamat Hashim, the MILF refused to sign the GRP-MNLF peace agreement in 1996. Its leaders instead began their own talks with the government in 1997, but these were suspended after President Joseph Estrada launched an "all-out war" against the MILF in 2000. Peace talks restarted under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2001, with the Malaysian government, at the request of both the GRP and the MILF, agreeing to serve as host and facilitator of negotiations. Progress has occurred in the substance of GRP-MILF talks, with both sides announcing in late 2007 that they had resolved some of the thorniest issues on "ancestral domain," the third and final agenda item in GRP-MILF negotiations. Although the MILF later accused the GRP of renegeing on the consensus points, an interim agreement on ancestral domain is still possible, which could lead to the conclusion of a comprehensive peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF in 2008.

Except for the OIC and a few Muslim nations, the international community largely ignored the Mindanao conflict for decades. However, in the mid-1990s, evidence of al-Qaeda efforts to establish a base in the Philippines for militant Islamist activities drew closer international attention. Al-Qaeda-linked activities in the Philippines included plots to assassinate Pope John Paul II during his January 1995 visit to Manila, and to bomb a dozen airliners flying from Asia to the United States. Further, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law lived in Mindanao and funded al-Qaeda-related networks there.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States grew particularly concerned that Mindanao could become a training ground and sanctuary for international terrorists. This concern led to expanded U.S. military assistance to the Philippine government and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). U.S. military assets were deployed in the southern Philippines to assist efforts to pursue groups designated as international terrorists, including members of the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the local Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). American targets also included so-called MILF lost commands, who were linked to terrorism. American Special Forces under the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) established expanded counterterrorism operations, providing the AFP with intelligence, training, and weaponry. The objective was to assist the AFP in its efforts to reform, modernize, and enhance its ability to fight terrorist groups.

The Philippines thus became a major focus of the global war on terror. But because the Philippine government was engaged in peace negotiations with the MILF, and the MILF itself was not designated as a terrorist organization, other means of engagement besides the military were needed to improve the security regime in Mindanao and prevent further incursions by outside extremists.

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## USIP's Engagement

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In January 2003, MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim (who died in July 2003) wrote President George W. Bush to urge the United States to help resolve the conflict between the Philippine government and the Moro people.<sup>6</sup> During President Macapagal-Arroyo's state visit to the United States in May 2003, President Bush stated that "the United States will provide diplomatic and financial support to a renewed peace process" if the MILF will "abandon the path of violence . . . and addresses its grievances through peaceful negotiations." Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage subsequently added that while "the United States absolutely supports the territorial integrity of the Philippines, . . . we also recognize that the people of Mindanao have legitimate aspirations and some grievances."

Chairman Salamat welcomed the words of senior American leaders and wrote again to President Bush on May 20, 2003, stating that the MILF "has repeatedly renounced terrorism publicly as a means of attaining its political ends." Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly responded to Salamat's letter, reiterating President Bush's statement that the United States "recognizes that the Muslims of the southern Philippines have serious, legitimate grievances that must be addressed," but that the United States "is concerned about the links between the MILF and international terrorist organizations and asks that those links be severed immediately." If they are, Secretary Kelly added, the United States "stands ready to support, both politically and financially, a bona fide peace process between the Republic of the Philippines and the MILF."

On June 20, 2003, the MILF released an official policy statement in the name of its chairman, entitled "Rejecting Terror as a Means to Resolve Differences." Therein, Salamat stated, "I hereby reiterate our condemnation and abhorrence of terrorist tendencies . . . [and] reject and deny any link with terrorist organizations or activities in this part of the Asian region, particularly in the South Philippines, and elsewhere in the world."

The State Department wanted to respond to MILF overtures but was sensitive to direct contact with the MILF because of reports that some MILF commanders maintained connections with JI and al-Qaeda affiliates who had been trained at the MILF's Camp Abubakar. The State Department was unsure of the MILF's commitment to the peace process and wondered whether, at some future time, the group might have to be designated as a foreign terrorist organization. The State Department thus persuaded the interagency Deputies Committee to enlist USIP, instead of an official U.S. government agency, to assume a facilitating role in the Mindanao peace process "in coordination with the Government of Malaysia." The initiative was funded from a \$30 million appropriation for "promotion of peace in Mindanao" inserted by Senators Ted Stevens and Daniel Inouye into the First Iraq War Supplemental Appropriations of May 2003. Three million dollars was granted to USIP for administrative expenses, with the remaining \$27 million reserved for economic development activities in Mindanao, contingent on the conclusion of a peace agreement. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) received \$5 million in mid-2003 for educational programs in Mindanao and subsequently received the remaining \$22 million when no peace agreement was reached before the appropriation expired in September 2004.<sup>7</sup>

To implement the Institute's role as facilitator of the peace process, USIP President Richard Solomon, a former U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, assembled a group of other former ambassadors to the Philippines, the chairman of the USIP Board, and a retired general, to advise him on what came to be known as the Philippine Facilitation Project (PFP). This advisory group guided the authors of this report during the four-year life of the project.<sup>8</sup> The term "facilitation" signified that the United States was not assuming a direct, hands-on mediating role in the negotiations. Rather, USIP's role was to support the Malaysian government, which acted as the official mediator, while observing the negotiations closely to determine whether any agreement reached was viable enough for the U.S. government to commit its support during the implementation phase. Assuming that an agreement was reached, the Institute would have a continuing role to hold the parties

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accountable during its implementation. The U.S. government was unwilling to commit financial and economic assistance to MILF areas until an agreement had been signed. The State Department asked USIP to inform it of significant developments, advise on appropriate government responses, and, if the negotiations were not leading to a satisfactory settlement, recommend an end to U.S. engagement.<sup>9</sup>

## **PPF Activities**

From the beginning, the PFP staff developed and maintained frequent and close contact with the parties to the conflict (the GRP and the MILF), as well as with U.S. officials in Manila and Washington, D.C. During an August 2003 visit to the Philippines, a PFP delegation met with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her senior advisers, military officers, senior Philippine senators, religious leaders, and representatives of civil society (NGOs, Moros, and educators). The delegation then traveled to Cotabato City, where it met with MILF representatives, Moro leaders of the ARMM government, local government officials, and civil society leaders. Representatives of the U.S. embassy, including the ambassador, participated in many of these meetings.

Subsequent visits to the Philippines by PFP senior advisers and staff followed the same procedures. When President Macapagal-Arroyo visited the United Nations in September 2003, several senior advisers and USIP staff members met with her and her delegation (including the foreign secretary, executive secretary, and members of the Philippine congress) to review the status of the peace process and the role of the Institute. Ambassador Frank Wisner and USIP representatives also met with President Macapagal-Arroyo in California after her 2004 election to encourage a renewed GRP-wide effort to conclude an equitable settlement with the Moros. Shortly thereafter, senior advisers met with MILF and Moro civil society leaders to understand their perspectives better and discuss ways that the Institute might facilitate negotiations.

From 2003 to 2007, PFP and other USIP staff traveled to Manila and Mindanao six to eight times a year for meetings with GRP and MILF leaders, civil society representatives, and peace activists. Institute representatives also met several times with Malaysian officials to improve communication and explore possibilities for cooperation. However, serious challenges arose in implementing USIP's original mandate to facilitate the peace talks. The Malaysian government (and perhaps the MILF) resisted any American presence, even as observers, at the negotiations, and PFP staff was unable to attend any of the formal talks in Malaysia. Without participating in the formal talks, Institute staff and associates launched activities to address the substance of GRP-MILF negotiations and thus fulfill the spirit of the project's mandate from the Bush administration. This turned out to be a new and challenging mission because the lack of official status in the negotiations had to be overcome by establishing credible and productive relationships with both the MILF and the GRP. Ultimately, USIP succeeded in establishing such relationships. Efforts to help the parties think creatively of ways to overcome long-standing obstacles on ancestral domain and to initiate dialogue among disparate Moro ethnic groups made USIP a valuable contributor to the peace talks.

The GRP and the MILF had originally agreed on a three-item agenda for negotiation: (1) economic rehabilitation of conflict-affected areas, (2) security, and (3) resolution of ancestral domain issues. In 2001, both parties concluded negotiations on the economic development aspect of an agreement, giving the MILF-founded Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) semi-official status to coordinate and receive domestic and foreign assistance for Moro areas. Later, in June 2003, the parties concluded a cease-fire agreement that ended active hostilities and provided for the deployment of an International Monitoring Team (IMT), headed by Malaysian military officers, to help maintain the cease-fire in Mindanao. The third agenda item, ancestral domain, remained the last and thorniest issue

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To advance the peace process, PFP staff and advisers selected three areas of focus. First was ancestral domain, particularly addressing the need to bring international knowledge and experience to bear on this key point in GRP-MILF negotiations. Second was the public constituency for peace, focusing on ways to broaden understanding of the roots of the GRP-Moro conflict and to cultivate political accommodation between the majority Christian Filipinos and the Moro minority. PFP operated on the premise that without a large and active constituency for a settlement, there could be no genuine national reconciliation in the southern Philippines. A third focus was intra-Moro relationships. Division, competition, and poor communication among diverse Islamized ethnic groups have hindered effective Moro governance and prevented a more unified Moro stance in negotiations. Thus, measures were needed to improve intra-Moro dialogue and problem-solving.

### ***Ancestral Domain***

PFP Senior Research Associate Astrid S. Tuminez undertook extensive research on the history, substance, and likely trajectories of negotiations over ancestral domain. She wrote a white paper, which was submitted to members of the GRP and MILF peace panels.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, PFP conducted a three-day workshop on ancestral domain in Mindanao, bringing together members of the GRP peace panel, MILF-designated representatives, and a small group of Mindanao experts and observers to listen to, and interact directly with, international scholars and practitioners who had dealt firsthand with conflicts in their own countries related to ancestral domain (e.g., land, resources, and governance). International participants shared the cases of Native American, Maori, Sri Lankan, Sudanese, Inuit, Northern Irish, and Bougainvillean peoples.<sup>11</sup> Each expert underlined common threads of conflict over ancestral domain, highlighted successes and failures in negotiations, and analyzed arrangements reached in their respective case studies. None suggested a “right way” of addressing ancestral domain, but all attested to the difficulties associated with negotiations over land, resources, and governance. Several experts also emphasized the need to buttress any ancestral domain agreement with institutions, procedures, and other forms of support toward effective implementation.

The workshop illuminated commonalities, as well as unique aspects, of the Mindanao situation compared with cases in other parts of the world. Religious and cultural differences (“divided nationhood”) between north and south Sudan, for example, mirrored Christian-Muslim division in the southern Philippines, while tribal rivalries among Bougainvilleans echoed the challenges of intra-Moro conflict. MILF enthusiasm for Native American “sovereignty” and treaties with the federal government as a model for its own relationship with the government in Manila was tempered by an explanation of how the U.S. Congress could (and did) change or ignore historical agreements and commitments.

A significant amount of time at the workshop and in the period following was spent on parsing the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, between Inuit and the government of Canada. Key lessons included the need for internal unity and clarity of purpose among minority groups negotiating with a central government. Negotiators for the Inuit, for example, refused to begin negotiations until they had established and mandated institutions to negotiate with the Canadian government, had chosen personnel to represent them, and had developed a political consensus on key goals to be achieved through negotiations—a process that lasted about fifteen years. After a detailed agreement-in-principle was concluded and made public for comment by third parties, a final agreement followed some two years later. A vote among Inuit sixteen years of age and older and legislation passed by the Canadian parliament were required to ratify the agreement. Nearly three hundred pages in length, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement addresses ownership and

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management of ancestral lands and natural resources, self-governance, economic development of minerals and oil and gas, cash compensation, and social and cultural protection. Promises in the agreement confer “rights” to Inuit, protected under Canada’s constitution and enforceable through the courts. Amendment of the agreement requires the consent of the Inuit. Although the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement seemed a useful, though partial, model for the Moros, some participants noted that the demographic reality of a majority non-Moro population in the southern Philippines represents a serious challenge to implementing any similar arrangement in Mindanao.

After the ancestral domain workshop, Dr. Tuminez wrote a USIP Special Report, “Ancestral Domain in Comparative Perspective,” which became a reference document for the GRP and MILF teams.<sup>12</sup> Copies were provided to the negotiating panels, and discussions were held with panel members and advisers. PFP also sponsored subsequent visits to Manila and Mindanao by international experts on ancestral domain, conflict resolution, and comparative autonomy. These experts included Terry Fenge, who had spent ten years negotiating land and governance issues with the Canadian government on behalf of the Inuit people; Ted Wolfers, a seasoned practitioner and expert on Bougainville who served as an adviser to the Papua New Guinea government; and Yash P. Ghai, a scholar and authority on comparative autonomy and constitutional law. PFP also shared with the peace panels analyses, literature summaries, and materials pertinent to ancestral domain, autonomy, and self-determination. When members of the negotiating panels requested assistance on specific issues or source materials, PFP responded promptly. USIP’s initiatives on ancestral domain also motivated the Canadian embassy in Manila to sponsor a visit to Manila and Mindanao by Canadian government officials and leaders of indigenous groups to share their experience on land claims agreements with the government, Moros, and civil society.

### ***Public Constituency for Peace***

Though the conflict in Mindanao is an old one, Filipino public knowledge of, and interest in, the conflict and its origins are limited. Mindanao is physically and culturally distant from the highly centralized policymaking and economic elites of Manila, and few of the non-Muslim majority have much contact with Muslims. Moreover, Philippine education, social biases, and traditions tend to reinforce anti-Moro prejudice. During the Spanish colonial period, Moros were depicted as pirates, slave traders, and violent warriors. The American colonial period did little to reduce Spanish-era biases against Moros, whom Americans classified as “wild” or as “non-Christian tribes” that needed to be civilized. Much of this negative historical Moro imagery persists in the Philippines today.

Determined Moro resistance to conquest, integration, and marginalization also helps explain why the majority of the Philippine population is unsympathetic to Moro grievances. Many Filipinos perceive Moros as unreasonably stubborn and fanatical. To them, the conflict in Mindanao is a direct manifestation of unruly Muslim personalities rather than the result of centuries of oppression against the Moro minority.<sup>13</sup> Many support the use of force to deal with a rebellion that threatens to split the nation. Relatively few understand the economic, political, or cultural roots of conflict or the grievances and goals of the Moro population. Recent heightened emphasis by the media and some politicians on the threat of terrorism by Muslim extremists has further exacerbated negative public perceptions of Moros.

To strengthen the public constituency for peace and encourage national reconciliation, PFP devoted considerable resources to public education on the peace process and Moro history. This filled some of the gap created by confidentiality agreements that prevented the GRP and the MILF from publicly discussing the content of exploratory talks. Peace panel members not only refrained from discussing the substance of negotiations but also limited the information they released even in classified briefings to members of the Philippine congress and other officials. The scarcity of official information created a situation in which the public, both Muslim and Christian, often believed rumors and exaggerated

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claims. Some who opposed changes in the status quo in Mindanao, for example, fanned rumors that a deal on ancestral domain would lead to Moro confiscation of Christian lands and to the institution of fundamentalist Islamic law (sharia). They also accused the government of “treason” and of “selling out of the national patrimony.”

PFP engaged the public and national leadership on several fronts. It produced and disseminated to educators, journalists, and politicians a short video on ancestral domain, tracing the history of Moro grievances and articulating how and why an agreement on ancestral domain could effectively address the roots of conflict.<sup>14</sup> The video was shown during discussions of Moro ancestral domain in universities in Manila, at forums in Mindanao, and in a briefing with three senior Philippine senators. PFP staff and partners also engaged in discussions, debate, and televised interviews on the substance of ancestral domain, potential dangers, and the prospects for peace. *Newsbreak*, the country’s most prestigious newsmagazine, and other media published PFP articles on ancestral domain. Further, PFP funded nationwide broadcasts of radio dramas on intercommunal tensions and cooperation in Mindanao. These dramas were subsequently compiled into teaching modules for elementary and secondary schools, with the goal of acquainting teachers and students with constructive steps that individuals and communities could take toward interfaith and intercommunal understanding and cooperation.

PFP also sponsored a USIP training program in conflict management for civil society leaders engaged in a growing coalition of NGOs working to monitor the cease-fire and foster grassroots peacebuilding in communities with mixed Moro, Christian, and non-Islamic indigenous populations. Coordinating with the Institute’s Religion and Peacemaking program, PFP organized a roundtable with Muslim religious leaders to explore ways to reduce misunderstanding and promote tolerance. Staff met on many occasions with Catholic priests and bishops and *ulama* (Muslim scholars) to learn about and encourage interfaith dialogue and cooperation via the Bishops-Ulama Forum. The project also supported the creation of Quran-based peace curricula for use in local Islamic schools (*madaris*) in Mindanao. A project for dialogue among *ulama* from the three largest Moro ethnic groups did not materialize after the original intended leader failed to follow through on a proposal before PFP’s termination.

In Philippine public education, a key problem has been the failure to integrate the Moro narrative into Philippine history, thereby placing the Moros outside the stream of the Filipino story. Spanish and American colonial perspectives dominate Philippine textbooks, with accounts of the Moro sultanates, Islam, and Moro life either completely excluded or only cursorily covered. To address this problem, PFP sponsored the training of Mindanao history teachers on the history of Moro and other indigenous peoples of Mindanao. Historians and experts from Mindanao, rather than outsiders, spearheaded this training. Modules were prepared on a more inclusive version of Philippine history. Other funders are expected to continue this work, which USIP sponsored. In cooperation with the Institute’s Education program, PFP conducted other workshops and seminars with educators and administrators to address gaps in the curriculum and provide guidelines for teaching conflict resolution and peacebuilding to elementary and secondary school teacher-trainers. Further, PFP distributed to Education Department officials peacemaking materials that they could integrate into existing government peace curricula.

Mass media play a key role in mitigating or exacerbating biased portrayals of Moros and the conflict in Mindanao. Philippine media elites are concentrated in Manila, and television, print, and radio journalism often reflect the perspectives of the central government and the political and economic elites. Reporting on conflict tends to be sensational, inaccurate, or one-sided. Journalists cite military reports and official sources without checking their facts. Manila editors commonly change stories sent by stringers or correspondents in conflict areas when the stories do not fit preconceived views or qualify for attention-grabbing headlines. Articles routinely call Moro criminals “Muslim criminals” and attribute violent incidents of unclear origin to “Islamic terrorists.” One campaign to provide mosques for Manila’s growing Islamic community was maligned as a threat from

***PFP conducted other workshops and seminars with educators and administrators to address gaps in the curriculum and provide guidelines for teaching conflict resolution and peacebuilding to elementary and secondary school teacher-trainers.***



“Muslim fundamentalists.” Rarely are government and military actions critically assessed. Little effort is made to report on the underlying, historical causes of the conflict or the perspectives of Moros and other local populations in Mindanao.

To augment the constructive role of media in the peace process, PFP sponsored two training workshops for media representatives, entitled “Alternative Approaches to Covering Conflict.” Journalists working on the ground in Mindanao participated in the first, while editors and publishers from Manila joined the second. Each workshop began with content analysis of stories on the Mindanao conflict in selected print and broadcast media. The second workshop focused on whether the information conveyed in the first workshop resulted in improved reporting. Regrettably, media sampling in this instance was too small to reach a definitive conclusion. Mindanao correspondents said that they continued to have problems with Manila-based editors who revised or refused to publish their reports from the field. For their part, Manila-based senior media representatives and managers argued that educating or changing public perceptions of Muslims was not their responsibility. The media workshops highlighted the media’s role, for good and ill, in the interplay of perceptions and policy on the conflict in Mindanao. PFP also sponsored a series of seminars on institutional biases against Muslims, including in the media, the justice and educational systems, and the entertainment industry.

The Philippine military is a key player in the southern Philippines, and PFP drew on the Institute’s training program to conduct six workshops on conflict management, negotiation, and communication skills for mid-ranked Philippine officers. Training took place at two infantry division headquarters in Mindanao, at unified command headquarters in Zamboanga and Cebu Cities, and at General Headquarters in Manila. Most of the officers were, or had been, assigned to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and frequently interacted with local communities and politicians. Few had training in conflict management techniques, instead relying primarily on their military skills to resolve local disputes. Many had little if any background on Moro culture, history, or religion before their Mindanao rotation, and many soldiers viewed Moros with suspicion and hostility. While some senior officers believed war-fighting should be soldiers’ sole focus, others welcomed the training that USIP conducted as an enhancement to the military’s understanding of its role in a diverse society. A senior commander noted that the training broadened soldiers’ and officers’ perspectives on means other than force for resolving conflict.

### ***Intra-Moro Dialogue***

Many violent incidents in Mindanao arise not from the GRP-MILF conflict but from intra-Moro feuds involving clans and families.<sup>15</sup> Disputes over land, political positions, and personal affairs often escalate into serious clashes when relatives and friends are enlisted to aid one or another feuding party. When outside supporters are affiliated with the MILF or MNLF or with the army or local politician-sponsored militias, violence escalates into the “official” level. The roots of intra-Moro divisions hark back to the establishment of separate Muslim sultanates dominated by different ethnic groups that periodically banded to fight foreign invaders but also fought one another. Although Islam and a shared history of oppression and struggle against colonialists unite the ethnolinguistically diverse tribes, rivalries among Moro politicians and leaders for economic favors from Manila and competition for political advantage undercut efforts to establish a strong, unified Bangsamoro identity and clear, shared goals. The divisions between traditional leaders, between local politicians, and between armed revolutionary groups such as the MNLF and MILF exacerbate corruption, poor governance, and overt conflict.

The MNLF-MILF formal split in 1983 partly reflects Moro ethnolinguistic division. The majority of the MNLF, and especially its leaders in the early years of revolution, were ethnic Tausugs from the island of Sulu. Although members of the other two largest Moro groups, the Maguindanaos and Maranaos, also joined the MNLF, ultimately their loyalties reverted to their ethnic groups. Thus, the MILF ranks and leadership consist mainly of

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***To help bridge intra-Moro divides, PFP sponsored a series of focused group discussions among senior Moro leaders in the ARMM, on the future government of a Bangsamoro Homeland.***

Maguindanaos and Maranaos. After the MNLF-GRP peace agreement in 1996, the MNLF assumed control of the ARMM government while the MILF continued to fight an insurgency. In the course of current peace talks, MNLF and MILF leaders have made some attempts to resolve their differences and reunite, but none of these efforts have succeeded. The two organizations communicate poorly, and MNLF leaders are particularly concerned that the GRP-MILF peace process might lead to the further disregard of their own 1996 agreement and to their marginalization from political power.

To help bridge intra-Moro divides, PFP initially proposed a series of low-key dialogues among senior Moro leaders, including the MNLF and MILF. However, the initial response from some Moro elites was that intra-Moro disputes were too sensitive to be aired in an American-sponsored forum. Thus, instead of an overt dialogue with an American presence, PFP sponsored a series of focused group discussions among senior Moro leaders in the ARMM, on the future government of a Bangsamoro Homeland. PFP delegated this task to the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies, a Muslim think tank based in Cotabato City. In addition, PFP directly conducted a series of seven forums with young (aged roughly twenty to forty) Moro leaders. The series' goals were to enhance dialogue and a candid exchange of views on Moro problems and Moro prospects for the future, strengthen the network of young Moro professionals, and identify and encourage future collaborative activities. More than 150 young leaders representing diverse professions, political orientations, and ethnic backgrounds participated. The forums provided an unprecedented opportunity for rising Moro leaders to meet and discuss candidly the problems and prospects of the Bangsamoro people. Discussions covered Moro identity and aspirations, the problems of constructing Moro nationhood, the peace process and its implications, challenges for Moro leadership, the role of religion in building the Moro future, and Moro relations with the outside world, especially the United States. This series culminated in a final report that was disseminated widely in Manila and Mindanao.<sup>16</sup> Participants' feedback indicated that a foundation had been created for building further Moro unity and a shared vision of effective leadership. Rising leaders had increased confidence in their ability to articulate insights critical to strengthening Moro unity and governance. Some of the younger Moro leaders in the series held important positions in official and unofficial Moro institutions, while others had yet to make their mark. Most of the participants also belonged to key Moro clans and had parents or relatives in major positions in the MNLF or MILF, including in the MILF peace panel. PFP hoped that ideas forged in the forums would eventually have a positive impact on the work of the younger Moro leaders and their senior counterparts.

## **Operational Difficulties in Facilitating Peace Negotiations**

***The Philippine Facilitation Project was a new kind of endeavor for USIP and an unknown vehicle of U.S. policy promotion in the Philippines.***

The Philippine Facilitation Project was a new kind of endeavor for USIP and an unknown vehicle of U.S. policy promotion in the Philippines. The original scope of work (see Appendix B) given by the the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs gave the Institute "substantial discretion" to carry out its tasks but visualized close coordination and cooperation between the Institute, the State Department, and the U.S. embassy and the USAID mission in Manila. U.S. government representatives asked USIP staff to work with them to determine appropriate ways that USAID programs might be used to improve the prospects for a durable peace and to recommend positive and negative incentives for the GRP and the MILF.

The initial prospectus provided a solid foundation for the project's first year and a half. The Institute consulted the State Department on selecting PFP staff and coordinated closely on arrangements for PFP senior adviser and staff visits and objectives. Francis Ricciardone, the U.S. ambassador in Manila when the PFP began its work, and the USAID mission director in Manila welcomed the Institute's engagement and exchanged perspectives and information with the PFP staff. PFP also connected with USAID's "Growth with Equity in Mindanao" (GEM) field personnel, visiting several GEM project sites in conflict-affected

areas. Ambassador Ricciardone invited PFP staff to join him and the USAID administrator during the latter's visit to Mindanao and Basilan. The diverse but coordinated U.S. approach to support the peace process appeared to be working well. However, on occasion, Moros expressed suspicions that USIP, because of its association with official U.S. government representatives, might not be an entirely neutral and independent player. USIP addressed these concerns directly, and over time, PFP staff managed to convince most Moros of the Institute's separate, nonofficial status. This helped establish relationships of confidence and trust with Moro officials and civil society.

PFP senior advisers and staff first visited Manila in August 2003 to introduce the project to the Philippine government and MILF leaders. While President Macapagal-Arroyo and the government welcomed the Institute's engagement, they also seemed to have reservations and a lack of understanding of the Institute's quasi-official, "track one-and-a-half" role. The U.S. ambassador and embassy officers accompanied the delegation during calls on the president and other officials in Manila, perhaps creating an impression that the Institute was part of the State Department. In Mindanao, the delegation met with military and local government officials and representatives of the MILF. Like leaders in Manila, the delegation's Moro interlocutors seemed confused about the Institute's standing and relationship with the embassy and the U.S. government.

Suspicious regarding the Institute's true affiliations and its relationship with U.S. government agencies complicated initial public reaction to the project. Some Moro and non-Moro leaders and civil society activists assumed that USIP was a Central Intelligence Agency front organization whose true objective was to infiltrate the MILF and subvert and split its members or, at minimum, discover MILF negotiating tactics and strategy and pass them along to the GRP. Others believed that the Institute was merely another U.S. government agency supporting U.S. counterterrorism activities in Muslim areas. Initially, PFP, seeking to coordinate with the embassy in Manila, invited embassy officers to attend Institute meetings and discussions. But U.S. government interlocutors were sometimes reluctant to speak openly, and Moro leaders were at times less candid when U.S. officials were present. Gradually, PFP conducted its activities more independently, though it kept embassy officials apprised of its general activities. PFP memoranda, research, and other publications were also shared with embassy and State Department officials. Over four years, PFP built sufficient trust among most Mindanao leaders and observers and affirmed the Institute's status as a track one-and-a-half, nonpartisan player. PFP staff also carefully maintained confidences and private information shared by either the MILF or the GRP. Nevertheless, even in early 2007, a Moro workshop participant cautioned his colleagues not to speak frankly to PFP personnel, because their views might be reported to the U.S. government.

The project's scope of work was flexible enough to authorize nearly all that the project accomplished, but it occasionally limited PFP's ability to respond positively to specific, tangible requests in support of the peace process. For example, in early 2004, a few months after the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team was posted in central Mindanao, the Philippine government peace panel in the Office of the Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process (OPAPP) asked USIP to provide financial support for Joint Monitoring Outposts (JMOs) in five contested *barangays* (villages) around the Liguasan Marsh in Maguindanao Province. Jointly manned by personnel from the AFP, the MILF, and Bantay Ceasefire (an NGO), the outposts provided an early warning capability to the IMT and the joint AFP-MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH). The JMOs were to warn of potential violent confrontations between armed elements, including local politicians' militias (e.g., civilian volunteer organizations, or CVOs, and civilian armed forces geographical units, or CAFGUs), local MILF supporters, and local police and military units.

OPAPP requested funding for a few pump boats (thin canoes with long-shaft outboard motors) for use in the shallow Liguasan Marsh, handheld radios and a base station, and a food allowance for team members at each of the outposts. The total cost for the five JMOs

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***Resolving the conflict in Mindanao is likely to be an extended undertaking, even with the best of intentions from all parties.***

would have been about \$100,000. With mobility and communications, the JMOs could patrol the contested areas, help mediate budding conflicts, and prevent minor issues from escalating into armed skirmishes. But the State Department would not authorize the use of its grant money for this endeavor, on the grounds that PFP funds had not been earmarked for logistical items, such as boats and radios, that might fall into terrorist hands. The State Department itself could not provide direct funding, and USAID noted that pump boats were not a legitimate development activity. PFP approached the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) for assistance, but PACOM indicated that it could not spare resources for a program that was not initiated by the Department of Defense.

As another example, during a February 2007 firefight between a militia loyal to the Maguindanao governor and pro-MILF residents of Midsayap town—an incident that a JMO team might have prevented—many houses in the locality were burned. OPAPP requested help from the Institute to rebuild some of the houses so that displaced families could return. Once again, the Institute was unable to assist, because “post-conflict” work fell outside its official mandate. USAID also declined to help, because rebuilding houses destroyed by conflict was not within its development agenda. If PFP had had the flexibility to provide tangible assistance on the ground, it could have enhanced its reputation and increased its access to local communities and leaders.

Another problem that limited PFP operations and impact was its exclusion from the official talks. The Malaysian government, which officially sponsored the GRP-MILF talks, did not welcome an American presence, particularly a non-governmental representative, in the talks. And GRP and MILF representatives were unwilling to push the Malaysians to include USIP representatives as observers or participants. Several meetings between PFP staff and Malaysian officials ended only in polite handshakes but no commitment to accommodate USIP’s participation.

Finally, the lack of a permanent USIP presence in Mindanao also limited the project’s effectiveness. While the executive director traveled from Washington to the Philippines five or six times a year and the senior research associate in Hong Kong visited frequently, there was no Institute representative on the ground whom government or MILF representatives could contact on a daily basis. Several Filipino colleagues told USIP that its efforts would be taken more seriously if it had a permanent local presence. A PFP permanent representative in Cotabato City, for example, could have maintained regular liaison with the MILF, civil society, military and government officials, peace activists, and the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team. This could have enhanced the project’s visibility and influence.

## **Obstacles to Peace in Mindanao**

Resolving the conflict in Mindanao is likely to be an extended undertaking, even with the best of intentions from all parties. Many challenges confront the current peace process. On the government side, the political will needed to carry the process through in the face of opposition from Christian groups and landowners has been insufficient. Although the president included peace in Mindanao as one of her top ten agenda items when she was elected in 2004, she has expended only minimal political capital to move the process forward. This stands in stark contrast, for example, to the visible commitment and direct involvement of former president Fidel V. Ramos, whose administration conducted talks that led to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF. The three branches of government also lack consensus on the outlines of a deal that may be offered to the Moros. As with past agreements, a serious risk exists that the national legislature could scuttle any agreement signed by the government in the implementation phase. The Supreme Court might also declare unconstitutional any deal on ancestral domain that grants Moros significant political authority and control over natural resources. A constitutional amendment might be required to protect a GRP-MILF agreement, but the prospects of this happening appear dim.



Multiple changes in the composition of the GRP negotiating team—including the mid-2007 resignation of Chairman Silvestre Afable, who had long been trusted and respected by his MILF counterparts—also pose a challenge. Although GRP negotiators are well informed, creative, and well intentioned, they are in many ways unable to influence those at the center of political power and public opinion. At the technical level, GRP representatives have proposed progressive and enlightened solutions, including genuine measures for Moro self-determination within a united Philippines, but these may never garner the necessary political or public support. The PFP staff met often with members of the GRP negotiating team and occasionally received reports that their recommendations on policy, negotiating strategies, and tactics were discarded, weakened, or undercut by cabinet members. This lowered the GRP team’s morale and effectiveness. Even the panel’s bold proposal in November 2006 to offer self-determination to the Moros was subsequently limited by the government’s unwillingness to compromise on the territorial extent of the prospective Bangsamoro Homeland. At one point, the Malaysians threatened to withdraw their involvement in the peace negotiations because they felt that the GRP negotiating team came to the table with an insufficient political mandate at a critical time in ancestral domain negotiations.

The ability and the intent of President Macapagal-Arroyo, whose term expires in 2010, to press the peace process to settlement are also uncertain. Despite strong public statements on peace, she has been unable to unite her administration or create a network of key interagency allies to stand behind a focused, determined policy of accommodation with the Moros. Further, because of her political liabilities, she has not obtained a critical mass of support from the military, the economic elites, and the larger public. Her flexibility to make decisions that work against the entrenched, parochial interests of some individuals and groups may be limited. Scandals have buffeted her family, and she has spent much of her energy fending off impeachment attempts. If she makes serious compromises with the MILF or forces significant change in the political and economic dominance of Christian migrants over land, resources, and political power in Mindanao, she could rouse a wave of opposition that might endanger her presidency. This suggests that the president has tremendous hurdles to overcome in bringing about an effective peace agreement during her tenure. Nonetheless, if such an agreement were signed and fully implemented, it would unequivocally augment the president’s historical legacy after nearly ten years at the helm of Philippine politics.

The MILF and Moro communities have their own set of problems. While the term “Bangsamoro” is the current unifying appellation for the thirteen Islamized ethnic groups in the southern Philippines, Moros still identify themselves foremost as Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, and so on. Rivalries and disputes fracture Bangsamoro perspectives. The MNLF and MILF, while claiming to represent all Moros, face opposition from traditional Moro chiefs (*datus*) and politicians who see these revolutionary organizations as a threat to their political fiefdoms. Disarray in Moro ranks makes it easy for the GRP to divide and co-opt many Moro leaders and diminishes the pressure to deal fairly with the entire Moro people. Internal Moro conflicts also reduce confidence that any peace agreement will result in long-term stability and good governance. Many in the Moro elite consistently put their personal and clan interests ahead of the common Moro welfare. Corruption and criminality abound in many Moro-ruled areas. The continued presence in Moro communities of extremist and criminal groups such as Abu Sayyaf, JI affiliates, and others reinforces skepticism among the Christian majority about the merits of accommodating Moro demands and granting Moros greater political autonomy or more control over natural resources.

## **USIP’s Facilitating Contributions**

The Institute’s four-year facilitation project gave positive impetus and support to the GRP-MILF negotiations in a variety of ways. The project’s research, publications, workshops, and other forums on ancestral domain introduced concepts and approaches that were

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useful to the government and MILF peace panels. The sharing of international knowledge and experience, via publications and direct consultations, assisted GRP and MILF technical advisers in exploring new formulas for a future political arrangement for the Bangsamoro people within a territorially united Philippines.

The Institute's public advocacy for the peace process and its efforts on education also helped inform the Philippine population more broadly, and elites in Manila in particular, of issues underlying the conflict in Mindanao and of possible means of resolving them. Institute efforts have added marginally to more balanced media coverage of Mindanao. A number of educators and educational administrators have become conscious of their responsibilities to address historic biases in Philippine curricula and teaching methods. Religious leaders have participated in discussions on their own role in helping end hostility between communities. Many policy papers related to the peace process were published through USIP funding and disseminated to a broad range of scholars, analysts, journalists, and policymakers. Educational materials were developed for use in Philippine schools and other forums. PFP also provided support to NGOs seeking to strengthen their alliance to advance peace through cease-fire monitoring, building "zones of peace" (communities where armed groups are not allowed to operate), training community leaders, and educating people on conflict resolution techniques. The project engaged with a broad range of actors in Mindanao, visiting remote areas where official U.S. government personnel could not travel freely. By focusing on social, historical, religious, and cultural issues, the project filled some gaps not addressed by official U.S. governmental interactions, counterterrorism activities, and economic development assistance policies.

Perhaps one of the more lasting contributions of PFP is its work in facilitating and strengthening intra-Moro communication and unity through its series of dialogues with young Moro leaders. Dismayed at times at their own lack of power and at poor leadership by more senior Moros, the next generation is desperately seeking fresh ideas and solutions. Many of these young leaders felt rejuvenated and inspired by the USIP-sponsored forums, and they have increased confidence in their own ability to think critically, debate issues, and make a difference in their spheres of expertise. The challenge going forward is for young Moros to maintain and broaden their networks of communication, inspiration, and action so that they can help break the cycles of violence and frustration caused by the long saga of co-optation, corruption, and violence in their lands. They also need to strengthen their channels of communication with senior leaders, particularly those involved in negotiating with the government and in designing the future contours of governance in a Bangsamoro homeland.

PFP provided a strong contrast on the ground in Mindanao to public perceptions that the United States was fixated only on military counterterrorism- and counterinsurgency-motivated development assistance. The project's focus on history, politics, and social matters highlighted the deep causes of conflict and helped negotiators and other interested parties begin to think of more effective and creative long-term responses. In a modest sense, the project began to fulfill the commitment, made by Assistant Secretary of State Kelly to MILF Chairman Salamat, that the United States "recognizes that the Muslims of the southern Philippines have serious, legitimate grievances that must be addressed" if there is to be stable peace in Mindanao.

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## **PFP and U.S. Policy in Mindanao**

As earlier noted, the State Department in 2003 was unsure of the MILF's reputed connections to terrorist elements and chose to have USIP take the lead in establishing contacts with the organization. As a quasi-governmental, track one-and-a-half organization, the Institute offered a new policy instrument for the U.S. government that could serve as a channel of communication outside official policy mechanisms. Initial close working relationships among the State Department, embassy, USAID, and USIP permitted a useful division of responsibilities: State and the embassy encouraged the GRP to focus on the

peace process; USAID undertook economic development assistance in Mindanao; and USIP worked with the GRP and MILF on substantive aspects of negotiation. The embassy was also closely engaged with PACOM in counterterrorism training and defense reform with the AFP and was thus linked to a highly visible American military presence in Mindanao. The Institute, while in close touch with the embassy and the State Department, had a degree of separation from official policy channels, was not identified with U.S. military counterterrorism policies, and had greater flexibility to work with a wide range of actors and institutions.

U.S. official attitudes about dealing directly with the MILF changed over time, leading to less enthusiasm for a USIP role. The GRP-MILF cease-fire had effectively held for four years, making MILF areas safer for travel. The MILF remained off the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations, and its negotiations with the government continued. Embassy officials began meeting directly with MILF leaders and believed that USIP was no longer needed as an intermediary. One embassy official noted to PFP that the formal peace process, which had been USIP's focus, was not the most critical element of future stability in Mindanao. Therefore, given other priorities, funds could no longer be dedicated to USIP. Instead, the embassy would increase its direct involvement, and USAID would expand its contacts with the MILF through the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), working with the organization to plan future development activities.<sup>17</sup>

MILF and other Moro leaders welcomed direct and more frequent contact with embassy officials. They had long expressed frustration that the U.S. government was not directly engaged in the peace process. Former Chairman Salamat's request for, and subsequent welcome of, U.S. government support for the peace process was based on the belief that only the United States had sufficient leverage over the Philippine government to push for the conclusion and strict implementation of an equitable peace agreement. The MILF was willing to work with the Institute, but its leaders and other Moros frequently stated that unless the U.S. government became involved and used its influence to persuade the GRP to implement a fair settlement, the talks would not succeed. The GRP view was the opposite—that the U.S. government should use the threat of designating the MILF a terrorist organization in order to pressure MILF leaders to accept a relatively quick settlement that did not significantly alter existing power relationships in Mindanao.

Without question, the U.S. government could and must take an active lead role in any peace process in Mindanao. Apart from its official status and responsibilities, the U.S. government has many more resources at its disposal than does USIP. Because of its special historical relationship as the former colonial power in the Philippines, its present security interests, and its investment in development projects, the U.S. government wields significant leverage to encourage both the MILF and the GRP to sign and implement a sound agreement. U.S. policy instruments in Mindanao include diplomacy, conditionality of U.S. economic and military assistance programs, and more punitive measures on the counterterrorism front. But U.S. policymakers will have to convince many skeptics in Mindanao of American intentions to help Moros resolve their legitimate, historical grievances. PFP staff often heard Moro leaders and activists declare that U.S. support for the peace process was only a poor adjunct to the U.S. government's overall counterterrorism campaign. In their view, U.S. focus on Mindanao came about because of 9/11, and the U.S. objective was to protect its security interests rather than resolve the historic conflict over Moro ancestral land, natural resources, and governance. Many Moros associate U.S. embassy and USAID officials with U.S. counterterrorism "baggage," and that view is likely to limit the credibility of U.S. officials as facilitators of the peace process and as bridge builders among many competing parties in Mindanao.

To facilitate long-term peace, U.S. policymakers must give the GRP-MILF negotiations a higher priority and must commit to working with both parties over the time required to reach an agreement and implement it. Adequate fiscal and personnel resources will be needed to pursue this endeavor and maintain continuity over years of negotiation and difficult implementation. The role of Indonesia after the 1996 GRP-MNLF agreement is

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instructive. Indonesia actively facilitated the GRP-MNLF peace agreement but became distracted by subsequent domestic political and economic crises, leaving the GRP and MNLF to implement the agreement without international oversight. A similar abandonment of international monitoring, and the potential collapse of a GRP-MILF agreement, could lead to renewed violence and the erosion of any hopes that the Moro conflict can be settled in the near future through means other than warfare.

U.S. support for the Mindanao peace process must be consistent, committed, and continuous. This is a tall order, given the changes that routinely occur within the four-year term of any U.S. administration and that intensify during turnovers in political leadership. Some continuity of personnel is critical. By the end of the Institute's four-year facilitation project, all U.S. officials involved in initiating the project had been transferred, leaving only the PFP staff and senior advisers with historical memory and personal relationships in Mindanao. When and if a peace agreement is signed, its implementation will require monitoring by those with knowledge of the negotiating process, the actors involved, and the mechanisms of implementation. It is conceivable that in the future the U.S. government could reengage USIP to work in the critical margins of peacemaking in Mindanao: facilitating dialogue among competing groups, providing in-depth knowledge and historical memory, and creating the continuity that is often impossible with transient State Department and embassy officials.

The U.S. government does not need to go it alone. An option for the long haul may be to spearhead an international coalition of "Friends of Mindanao," including the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, and other countries already engaged with the Moros. An ad hoc coalition of willing and committed international actors focused on a political solution to the conflict could help ensure that external oversight continues even if one or two members of the coalition falter.

## **Conclusion**

The Institute's PFP ceased in June 2007, with the peace process in Mindanao far from concluded. The GRP-MILF October 2007 Joint Statement announcing "the successful resolution of major issues . . . over the Ancestral Domain agenda on territory" was followed in mid-December by an MILF charge that the GRP was "reneging on the consensus points" reached in October. It is clear that further negotiations are needed on the territorial extent of the future Moro homeland (i.e., the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity) before the stage is set for moving into a public advocacy phase to educate the Philippine public and political elites on the merits of the agreement.

When a comprehensive peace agreement is signed, its implementation will require the full support of the GRP and the MILF as well as the Philippine polity and the international community. The government will need to overcome strong political opposition to compromises made with the Moro minority, while the MILF will need to enlist the support of other Moro factions, including the MNLF, politicians, and traditional leaders. Philippine civil society—educators, religious leaders, and media—will also be needed to support efforts toward conscientious implementation of the agreement by both parties.

The international community must remain engaged, pressing both parties to continue negotiations and to follow through on their agreed commitments during the implementation phase. Growing diplomatic contacts between foreign governments and the MILF, and promises of enhanced economic assistance, should be matched with direct political encouragement and monitoring of the parties' adherence to their commitments. U.S. participation is critical and could involve governmental, non-governmental, and quasi-governmental resources to monitor compliance.

At the close of the four-year Philippine Facilitation Project, the PFP staff believes that several points deserve emphasis:

***When a comprehensive peace agreement is signed, its implementation will require the full support of the GRP and the MILF as well as the Philippine polity and the international community.***



1. The roots of conflict in Mindanao are primarily political, not economic or religious. Moros have been and continue to be second-class citizens in the Philippines. Oppressed by foreign colonial, Filipino, and even Moro leaders, common Moros see little potential for improvement in their future. Marginalized from their own lands and badly governed, they seek a measure of justice and a genuine structure of self-government before they can see themselves as full citizens and members of the Philippine nation. The Philippine central government will need to muster the political will to address Moro grievances, especially on land claims, control over economic resources, and political self-governance. Serious opposition to accommodation will arise from a number of parties—both Christian and Moro—with deeply vested interests in Mindanao. But until the GRP acknowledges and begins to rectify Moro grievances, the conflict will continue to fester and is likely to worsen. There is no magic formula for peace, but criminality, violence, and terrorism are likely to diminish only when most Moros believe that they have a stake in peace and order and a degree of control over their political, economic, and cultural life.
2. Outsiders involved in Mindanao should take seriously the peace process and its potential outcomes. The process provides a nonviolent venue for articulating and addressing deep-seated Moro grievances. As such, it deserves as much—if not more—priority than military assistance and other forms of counterterrorism activities. Military instruments are too blunt to address the delicate nuances of intergroup conflict in the southern Philippines and may sometimes worsen the situation. Recipients welcome periodic U.S. and Philippine military-led civic action programs in the absence of government services, but these are mere Band-Aids over deeper wounds caused by bad governance from corrupt local and national leaders. Diplomacy, political commitment, civil society engagement, and post-conflict development assistance are likely to be more effective instruments for lasting peace. More programs to improve governance and the administration of justice are sorely needed. History must be taught more honestly and broadly, and Moro perspectives need to be integrated better into the national narrative of the Philippines.
3. Any agreement is only as good as its implementation. Previous agreements to bring peace to Mindanao have failed for lack of rigorous compliance by both parties and inadequate resources to implement promises made. To ensure the implementation of a new agreement, the GRP and the MILF need to formulate a detailed road map with clearly defined benchmarks, milestones, and deadlines. Annual or biannual compliance reviews should take place, conducted by a nonpartisan body. An international monitoring or oversight body could be established to help keep the agreement on track; its members should include countries that are most actively engaged in post-conflict rebuilding in Mindanao. A dispute resolution mechanism must also be devised to deal with missed deadlines or noncompliance.
4. As many relevant stakeholders as possible in conflict-affected areas should be included in consultations on matters being negotiated before the signing of an agreement. Although there is value in dealing with some sensitive issues without public discussion, broad public support for peace can come about only if enough of the public knows and understands the merits of an agreement. Information on, and options for, addressing the problems of Muslim Mindanao need to be widely disseminated and discussed, allowing all sectors of society—Muslim, Christian, and non-Islamic indigenous groups—an opportunity to voice their concerns and preferences.
5. Efforts to strengthen intra-elite dialogue among Christian policymakers and opinion makers in Manila and Mindanao, as well as intra-Moro dialogue on the future of the Bangsamoro people and their system of governance, are critical to peace. Catholic leaders throughout the Philippines need to actively mitigate historical sectarian hostility and prejudice between Christians and Muslims. The church's influence could

***The Philippine central government will need to muster the political will to address Moro grievances, especially on land claims, control over economic resources, and political self-governance.***

***Previous agreements to bring peace to Mindanao have failed for lack of rigorous compliance by both parties and inadequate resources to implement promises made.***

***Philippine economic progress and U.S. counterterrorism objectives will remain precarious until the Mindanao conflict is resolved.***

be particularly helpful among political elites in Manila. Often, the deepest and most vehement opposition encountered by GRP and MILF negotiators has come not from outside but from within their constituencies. Facilitating intra-Christian and intra-Muslim dialogue can be a sensitive and difficult undertaking, but it is essential to mustering the public support needed to make a long-term settlement work.

6. The U.S. government lacks a comprehensive interagency policy that gives priority to the conclusion of a viable settlement in the southern Philippines. Philippine economic progress and U.S. counterterrorism objectives will remain precarious until the Mindanao conflict is resolved. Executive branch agencies—State/USAID and Department of Defense—should engage Congress in a continuing dialogue on policies and programs. Non-governmental and quasi-governmental organizations such as USIP need to be included to extend the field of U.S. engagement into parts of Philippine society that are less accessible to U.S. officials. The costs are low, but the potential payoff will be relatively high for all parties, should an effective settlement be put in place to resolve the conflict in Mindanao. For the United States in particular, the payoffs could include a more secure environment in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, a stronger and more stable political and economic partner in the Philippines, and a positive ending to America’s historic role in shaping the future of the Moros of Mindanao.

## **A New Tool of Diplomacy**

The positive contributions of USIP in facilitating peace processes in the Philippines, Nepal, and other countries provide important lessons relevant to the changing structure of international relations.<sup>18</sup> Because of its ability to deal with nonstate actors and issues in conflict areas that are untouchable for U.S. government officials, the Institute can be an instrument for advancing U.S. interests. The increasing complexities of diplomacy in the twenty-first century require government agencies to consider and deploy new tools and techniques of conflict management, including the involvement of a range of quasi- and non-governmental actors, to accomplish the goals of U.S. foreign policy.

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The State Department is learning to adapt to the presence and role of other agencies in foreign affairs. But it also needs increasingly to reach out to nonstate actors who might bring new ideas, capabilities, and relationships favorable to U.S. interests. While unofficial representatives should coordinate with State and embassy counterparts, they must also maintain separate identities and roles to avoid being seen as just another arm of government. By operating independently, non- or quasi-governmental organizations can work in sensitive or restricted areas more easily than diplomatic representatives constrained by official strictures. The independence of quasi- and non-governmental organizations allows them to gain insights and information, as well as establish relationships, that could advance peace and cooperative relations in areas important to U.S. foreign policy.

USIP’s role as facilitator (rather than negotiator or mediator) in the Philippines dealt with issues that the embassy could not tackle directly:

- working with a nonstate actor (the MILF), gaining its trust despite initial suspicions, and helping both parties prepare for negotiations;
- conveying ideas, as it did with ancestral domain, to help negotiators find ways to overcome past obstacles and mind-sets;
- helping build public support for a settlement by engaging Filipino educators, media, and religious leaders; and
- focusing attention on the need for follow-through in a postagreement implementation phase.

USIP has unique and important capabilities and experiences, which have proved effective and which could be incorporated more frequently into the tool kit of U.S. foreign policy to promote peace in critical parts of the world.<sup>19</sup>

## Appendix A

### *Letter from Chairman Salamat Hashim to President George W. Bush*

*20 January 2003*

Your Excellency:

In the name of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), we send our profound and felicitous greetings of peace on behalf of the Bangsamoro People of our historic homeland in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan.

The Bangsamoro People have always looked upon your country, the United States of America, and its people, with esteem as a great champion of freedom and democracy. The founding fathers of the American Nation as firm believers of “self-evident truths” and “inalienable rights” have become inspirations for the Moro Nation in our quest for the right to self-determination.

Your ambassador to the Philippines, His Excellency Francis J. Ricciardone, who recently addressed the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines, raised the question of the US Government’s desire to know “what they (MILF) want or how it’s (the Problem) going to be resolved.”

We take this opportunity to inform Your Excellency that the MILF is a national liberation organization, with leadership supported by the Bangsamoro People, and with legitimate political goal to pursue the right of the Moro Nation to determine their future and political status. As part of this process, we have an on-going negotiation with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines to arrive at a negotiated political settlement of the Mindanao conflict and the Bangsamoro problem, through the mediation and tender of good offices of the Government of Malaysia.

Your desire to be informed of the MILF goals reminds us of the historic, legal and political relationship between the Moro Nation and the US Federal Government as borne out by documents, treaty relations and instruments. Your official policy, under William McKinley’s Instruction to the First Philippine Commission of 1900, treated the Moro Nation initially as a Dependent Nation similar to North American Indian Nations under treaty relations with the US Federal Government. Subsequently, the Moro Nation was accorded the political status of a US protectorate under the Kiram-Bates Treaty of 1899, confirming the Treaty of 1878 between Sultan of Sulu and Spain.

Your policy to consider the Philippine archipelago as an unincorporated territory of the United States paved the way for the US Government to administer affairs in the Moro territories under a separate political form of governance under the Moro Province from the rest of the Philippine Islands.

Your project to grant Philippine independence obliged the leaders of the Moro Nation to petition the US Congress to give us an option through a referendum either by remaining as a territory to be administered by the US Government or granted separate independence 50 years from the grant of Philippine independence. Were it not for the outbreak of the Pacific War, the Moro Nation would have been granted trust territory status like any of the Pacific islands states who are now independent or in free association with the United States of America.

On account of such circumstances, the Moro Nation was deprived of their inalienable right to self-determination, without waiving their plebiscitary consent. Prior to the grant of Philippine independence on July 4, 1946, American Congressional leaders foresaw that

***USIP has unique and important capabilities and experiences, which have proved effective and which could be incorporated more frequently into the tool kit of U.S. foreign policy to promote peace in critical parts of the world.***

the inclusion of the Moro Nation within the Philippine Commonwealth would result in serious conflicts in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan, arising from the inability of the Filipino leaders to govern the Moro people. This condition or states of affairs have continued to prevail to the present day.

In view of the current global developments and regional security concerns in Southeast Asia, it is our desire to accelerate the just and peaceful negotiated political settlement of the Mindanao conflict, particularly the present colonial situation in which the Bangsamoro people find themselves.

We are therefore appealing to the basic principle of American fairness and sense of justice to use your good offices in rectifying the error that continues to negate and derogate the Bangsamoro People's fundamental right to seek decolonization under the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960. For this purpose, we are amenable to inviting and giving you the opportunity to assist in resolving this predicament of the Bangsamoro People.

With assurances of our highest esteem and cordial regards.

Very truly yours,

SALAMAT HASHIM  
Chairman

## Appendix B

### *Scope of Work for United States Institute of Peace: Project to Further Prospects for Peace in Mindanao*

The United States Institute of Peace hereby agrees to:

1. Help facilitate a peace process between the RP and the MILF, through persuading both parties to negotiate in good faith so as to reach a sustainable peace. To that end the USIP will:
  - A) Appoint a senior USIP management panel, including a person respected by both parties and endorsed by the United States Government, to be the channel of communication between the parties to shepherd the negotiations, in coordination with the Government of Malaysia;
  - B) Appoint USIP contract-hire employee(s) as necessary to staff a secretariat for the negotiation process;
  - C) Appoint, as USIP deems necessary, international figures of stature to serve as "wise men/women" to monitor the process and to encourage the parties;
  - D) Communicate directly with the duly appointed representatives of the RP on the one hand and of the MILF on the other, in an effort to ascertain the objectives of each party with respect to key aspects of the conflict (parameters of political "autonomy"; ancestral domain/land ownership; economic development; post-conflict status of weapons; amnesties, disbandment of combat units or integration into the Armed Forces of the Philippines and/or the Philippine National Police, etc.);
  - E) Coordinate directly with the Government of Malaysia (GOM), which heretofore is using its own good offices to bring the disputing parties together, and with any other parties USIP deems necessary;
  - F) Travel as deemed necessary in order to consult with the parties and with the Government of Malaysia, carry out the negotiations and execute other relevant tasks;



- G) Facilitate unofficial meetings, negotiation training, study trips to other “post-conflict” countries, and other technical assistance and confidence-building measures, as appropriate;
  - H) Offer recommendations for strengthening ceasefire monitoring and reporting mechanisms;
  - I) Carry out other tasks as they arise in connection with the assignment; and
  - J) Coordinate with and report to State’s Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) on a regular basis regarding the status of the negotiations and other activities.
2. Assuming that the parties are able to come together and initiate discussions, assist the USG in determining appropriate benchmarks for implementation of meaningful economic benefits. In this connection, USIP will:
    - A) Explore with the U.S. Embassy in Manila and the USAID Mission how to maximize and extend proven existing US Government livelihood programs and mechanisms to which MILF has explicitly requested access, as well as other USAID Mindanao programs in health, education, and small-scale infrastructure;
    - B) Work with the RP and the MILF to determine the appropriate role of the MILF’s legitimate front organization, the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), in working with the U.S. Government, including USAID (and eventually other foreign donors) to implement assistance, while ensuring that both the MILF and the RP are consulted on specific projects;
    - C) Consult with other foreign donors, international financial institutions (i.e., Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and any other relevant groups or organizations as necessary, as to other means for delivering economic assistance to the Muslim population of Mindanao and facilitating investment opportunities to benefit that population; and
    - D) Make recommendations to EAP as to how to structure positive and negative incentives for both the Government of the Philippines and the MILF, so that the prospects for a durable peace are maximized.
  3. If the parties are successful in concluding an agreement, stand available to assist in the implementation of the agreement, including through the development of facilitation programs and mechanisms.
  4. If the parties are unable to make meaningful progress in the discussions, the grantee will advise the U.S. Government as to when to withdraw its support for the process.
  5. The total budget required to execute these activities is approximately \$3 million.
  6. The Department of State, recognizing both the expertise of USIP and the independent role intended for that organization when Congress created it, will delegate substantial discretion to USIP in carrying out the tasks enumerated above.

## Appendix C

### *International Participants at Ancestral Domain Workshop, May 24–27, 2005, Davao City*

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Sudan</b>                         | <b>Francis Deng</b><br>Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons;<br>Director, SAIS Center for Displacement Studies,<br>Johns Hopkins University |
| <b>Native Americans</b>              | <b>Walter Echo-Hawk</b><br>Senior Staff Attorney<br>Native American Rights Fund   |
| <b>Land and Resources</b>            | <b>David Fairman</b><br>Managing Director, Consensus Building Institute<br>Associate Director, MIT-Harvard Public Disputes<br>Program   |
| <b>Canada/Nunavut</b>                | <b>Terry Fenge</b><br>Strategic Counsel and Director of Research<br>Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Ottawa  |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b>              | <b>Roger MacGinty</b><br>Lecturer<br>University of York   |
| <b>New Zealand Maori</b>             | <b>Martin Mariassouce</b><br>Te Puni Kokiri, Accounts Manager<br>Maori Business Facilitation Service  |
| <b>Bougainville/Papua New Guinea</b> | <b>Ronald May</b><br>Professor of Political Science<br>Australia National University  |
| <b>Sri Lanka</b>                     | <b>Jehan Perera</b><br>Media Director<br>National Peace Council   |

## Notes

1. The term “Moros” derives from the Spanish cognate for “Moors,” the Islamic people who ruled peninsular Spain from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries. Spanish colonial rulers applied the term to the Islamic tribes of the Philippines, and for centuries, “Moro” was primarily a derogatory label. However, in the 1970s, Philippine Muslims began to redefine the term “Moro” and used it increasingly as a badge of honor and a marker of an identity among the thirteen Islamized ethnic groups of the southern Philippines. Most recently, Moros have popularized the term “Bangsamoro” (Moro nation) to connote a people with common identity, history, and aspirations for self-determination and independence.
2. For background on the Mindanao conflict and history, see Thomas McKenna, *Rebels and Rulers: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Marites Danguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 2000); Patricio P. Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict* (Davao City, Philippines: Mindanews Publications, 2003); and B. R. Rodil, *A Story of Mindanao in Question and Answer* (Davao City, Philippines: MINCODE, 2003).
3. For a detailed account of the negotiations that led to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, see Abraham “Abet” Iribani, *Give Peace A Chance: The Story of the GRP-MNLF Peace Talks* (Manila: Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, 2006). An entire journal issue reviewing the 1996 peace agreement ten years after its signing is *Autonomy and Peace Review* 2, no. 3 (October-December 2006).
4. A study of the ARMM and its limitations and potential is found in Benedicto Bacani, *Beyond Paper Autonomy: The Challenge in Southern Philippines* (Manila: 2004).
5. Two books on the rise and spread of terrorist networks in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, are Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder, Colo.: Rienner, 2003); and Maria Ressa, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2003).
6. See Appendix A for a full text of Chairman Salamat’s letter to President Bush.
7. The funds that USAID received were used for broad development activities in Mindanao, rather than initiatives focused on MILF areas (as they would have been had there been a signed peace agreement).
8. PFP’s senior advisers included Ambassadors Steven Bosworth, Richard Murphy, Nicholas Platt, and Frank Wisner; USIP Board Chairman Chester Crocker; General Anthony Zinni (U.S. Marine Corps); and USIP President Richard Solomon. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Daley, who helped initiate the project, joined the advisory group after his retirement from government service.
9. For PFP’s scope of work, see Appendix B.
10. See Astrid S. Tuminez, “Ancestral Domain: Territory, Governance, Culture and the Quest for Bangsamoro Self-Determination,” paper prepared for the Philippine Facilitation Project, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., November 2004.
11. Appendix C lists the international scholars and practitioners who participated at the USIP-sponsored workshop on ancestral domain.
12. The Special Report may be downloaded from [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).
13. This is not to say that prejudice runs in only one direction. Moros themselves can be harsh judges of the Christian majority. But in the context of the Mindanao conflict, anti-Moro prejudice is the weightier cause. For a discussion of the prevalence of anti-Moro discrimination in the Philippines, see the *Philippine Human Development Report of 2005*, published by the United Nations Development Programme, at [http://hdr.undp.org/docs/reports/national/PHI\\_Philippines/Philippines\\_2005\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/docs/reports/national/PHI_Philippines/Philippines_2005_en.pdf).
14. The audiovisual production on ancestral domain may be viewed at [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).
15. The Asia Foundation sponsored a study on *rido*, or intra-Moro clan warfare. Initial findings and links to reports are posted at [http://www.asiafoundation.org/Locations/philippines\\_conflict.html](http://www.asiafoundation.org/Locations/philippines_conflict.html). The Asia Foundation study has been incorporated in an edited book: Wilfredo Magno Torres III, ed., *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Makati City, Philippines: Asia Foundation, 2007).
16. See Astrid S. Tuminez, “Young Moro Leaders Forum. The Bangsamoro Future: Prospects and Challenges,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, June 11, 2007, also at [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).
17. USAID’s engagement with the BDA marked a change from the earlier policy of not undertaking development initiatives in MILF areas unless a GRP-MILF peace agreement was in place. It may be that USAID had simply decided to follow what many other diplomatic missions and donor agencies were already doing in Mindanao: working with the BDA despite the absence of a formal peace agreement. Many, however, still see USAID projects as being connected to counterterrorism or counterinsurgency goals.
18. For a list of USIP projects in Nepal, see [www.usip.org/ruleoflaw/projects/countries/nepal.html](http://www.usip.org/ruleoflaw/projects/countries/nepal.html).
19. In Nepal, for example, the Institute’s Rule of Law program facilitated a series of dialogues on strengthening the rule of law and security, which included the Maoists, with whom the U.S. embassy could not work directly. These dialogues resulted in a national consensus approach to security and the rule of law, which helped move Nepal’s political settlement forward.

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

## Of Related Interest

- *Ancestral Domain in Comparative Perspective*, by Astrid C. Tuminez (Special Report 151, September 2005).
- *The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines*, by Benedicto R. Bacani (Special Report 131, February 2005).
- Young Moro Leaders Forum. *The Bangsamoro Future: Prospects and Challenges*, by Astrid S. Tuminez (Special Report, June 2007).



**United States  
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

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