

THE PHILIPPINES

It is one of the most beautiful archipelagos in South-East Asia and home to some of the most easy-going people in the world, or so the tourist brochures tell us. Yet in the southern Philippines lurks one of the most protracted and difficult conflicts in South-East Asia today. **Rebecca Hinchey** reports.



The massacre of eight Hong Kong nationals during an incident in a bus and the massacre of 60 people including 32 journalists in a single event in late 2009, briefly brought the problems in the Mindanao region under the international spotlight, providing a rare glimpse of the situation in one of Australia's nearest neighbours.

The Mindanao conflict has been plagued by an on-and-off armed battle since the 1970s, but has a much longer history of tension dating back to the 16th century.

Centred on the islands of Mindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, the sticking point has been the failed implementation of a succession of peace agreements.

In 2009 alone 610,000 people were displaced in the southern archipelago. Mass displacement joins aerial bombardments, armed violence, kidnappings and the killing of civilians in the human rights abuses besetting the region.

Dr Ronald May, Emeritus Fellow at the Australian National University's Society and Governance in Melanesia Program says: "You can subscribe to one of those emails where every day you hear about another atrocity, this person's been kidnapped and burnt."

The abuses are a manifestation of the long-running tensions between the predominantly Christian Philippines

and the sizable Islamic Moro groups of the south.

For the Moros issues of autonomy, self-determination and poverty are at the heart of the conflict, while for the newly elected Philippines Administration the central platform is how to successfully integrate a minority population into their island territories.

The situation is complicated by factors including the growth of non-Islamic communities in the region, the splintering of Moro representation, international Islamic terrorism and inter-clan rivalries.

As the Lowy Institute's East Asian experts Dr Malcolm Cook and Dr Kit Collier point out, solving such profound problems will be slow and require 'extensive economic and political change and foreign support'.

The conflict in the southern Mindanao and Sulu regions of the Philippines traces its roots all the way back to the Spanish colonisation of the Philippines in 1565. Despite their domination, the reach of Spanish power never made it to the Islamist practising people of the south, who had evolved as sophisticated Sultanates after the arrival of Islam in the 13th century.

The Moros - named by the Spanish after their detested enemy and prior rulers of Spain, the Moors - fought against their would-be conquistadors in a series of wars

spanning four centuries.

This period planted the seeds of mutual suspicion that continues among the three main inhabitants of present-day southern Philippines: the Moros also called the Bangsamoro, comprising approximately 20 percent of the population; Filipino-Christian settlers, comprising 75 percent; and non-Christian and non-Muslim indigenous people known as the Lumads, comprising five percent.

In a paper addressing ethnic and religious conflict in the Southern Philippines, Dr Jamail Kamlian, vice chancellor of the Office of Research and Extension at Mindanao State University, writes that Moros believe the conflict was caused by the Christian settlers. Christian Filipinos believe the Moros are traitors, kidnappers, land grabbers, troublesome and warlike, and the Lumads blame both groups for the fighting.

When the United States took over the Philippines in 1882 they succeeded in dominating the rulers of the south, although spasmodic armed resistance against the new colonial power continued. In 1942 the Philippines became independent and the then predominantly Islamic southern regions were incorporated into the nation.

This was despite protestations and a petition from a large group of Muslim leaders who stated in the Danslan Declaration: "...we do not want to be included in the Philippines for once an independent Philippines is launched, there would be trouble between us and the Filipinos because from time immemorial these two peoples have not lived harmoniously together".

The Australian National University's Dr May says the Muslims were right to be fearful of Christian dominance and forced conversions. "Heavy migration into Mindanao from the more populous areas of Luzon and the Visayas brought conflicts over land and threatened the authority of traditional Muslim political leaders ... Muslim and tribal populations often lost their rights to traditional land through land grabs, dubious legal transactions and even dealings by unscrupulous Muslim leaders".

Migration was encouraged by the United States Administration and the independent Philippines Government, both as a means of establishing new agricultural industries in the resource-rich south and of quelling any resistance from its Muslim inhabitants --by changing the cultural mix of the area. In 1903 the Muslim population of Mindanao was estimated at 76 per cent but by 1980 that figure had fallen to just 23 per cent.

The 1960s and 70s saw an increase in hostilities between Muslim and Christian settlers culminating in the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) a still-powerful organisation which took up arms in support of an independent state.

According to Dr Macapado Muslim, President of Mindanao State University, two key abuses gave rise to the contemporary armed struggle: the Jabidah massacre of 1968, where 28 young Muslims in the Philippine Army were murdered by their superior officers, and the killing of Muslims and razing of their buildings by Christian

vigilante groups during the period 1970 to 1972.

The MNLF came out into open warfare when in 1972 then President of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. This period was undoubtedly the bloodiest of the conflict.

Dr Inamullah Khan, secretary-general of the World Muslim Congress, estimated that between the years 1969 to 1976 about 60,000 people died, 54,000 were wounded and 350,000 people displaced in the Moro conflict.

Such substantial losses forced the international community to take note with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference stepping up as a major international player whose influence continues today.

The organisation, particularly member Libya, helped negotiate the 1976 Tripoli Agreement which brought an end to the most brutal period of the conflict. Under its terms 13 provinces would be given autonomy, subject to a plebiscite among the people living in those areas.

From the start implementation of the agreement faced insurmountable hurdles. In 1977, and without agreement, the Marcos Administration created two autonomous governments in 10 provinces with a vote to be held in April. With the exception of some generals, who took up ruling position in the autonomous regions, the MNLF rejected their actions and resumed a less intense armed resistance.

Concurrently cracks began to appear in the MNLF leadership culminating in the creation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) with Hashim Salamat at its helm.

As Soliman Santos describes in his *Human Development Report Evolution of the Armed Conflict on the Moro Front*, the split resulted from a number of differences, the Nur Misuari-led MNLF believed it was best to pursue peace negotiations, work for autonomy, be secular-nationalist and centralise decision-making and the MILF believed it was best to pursue armed struggle for independence, be more Islamic and pursue a more consultative structure.

It also centred on ethnic allegiances between Tausug, dominant in the Sulu Archipelago, and Maguindanao, more dominant on Mindanao island.

Ethnicity has had a strong influence on the conflict, but Associate Professor Bronwyn Winter, an expert in social movements in the Philippines at the University of Sydney; cautions against oversimplification. "When we talk about any of these so-called ethnic conflicts, they're always political, they're always about power, they're always about money, territory, land, those sorts of things."

In 1986 when Marcos was ousted, Corazón Aquino came to power and resumed peace talks with both groups, resulting in the 1987 Jeddah Accord between the Republic of the Philippines and the MNLF. The Jeddah Accord was an attempt to revive the Tripoli Agreement which led to the formation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

As per both the Tripoli and Jeddah agreements a plebiscite was held in 13 provinces and a number of cities, with only the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi opting in to the ARMM. Both the MNLF and the MILF rejected the referendum.

In 1992 General Fidel Ramos took the reins of power in Manila and reopened peace negotiations with the MNLF, much to the annoyance of many who believed it was giving fuel to a spent force now that the MILF was more dominant.

Nevertheless in 1996 the Jakarta Agreement was signed between the MNLF and the Philippines government. This too was designed to implement the Tripoli Agreement, with Misuari assuming governorship of the region amid wide spread hopes of an end to the conflict.

Opposition by the MILF and the election of Joseph Estrada as the President of the Philippines in 1998 put those hopes to an end. Estrada had ties to Christian business interests in the area, removing Misuari from his post and moving militarily against the MILF in 2000.

The ensuing years saw more violent bombings, involvement of foreign jihads and large-scale offensives by the Armed Forces of the Philippine (AFP). Successful in battle, the armed campaign arguably strengthened resolve in Mindanao, particularly among the MILF whose distrust of successive regimes in Manila only hardened. Defeated in combat, their troops, variously estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000, simply retreated and regrouped.

By this stage a smaller more ruthless organisation had emerged, the notorious Abu Sayyaf, described by many experts in the area as an outfit more involved in criminal activity such as kidnapping for ransom than a cohesive organisation with a broader agenda.

Abu Sayyaf was formed by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani who learnt his methods in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. A present day spoiler, Abu Sayyaf is a more radical group, disaffected by the actions of the MILF and the MNLF.

It has been responsible for some of the most high-profile incidents of the decade, including a raid on the town of Ipil which saw 50 people dead and almost all the buildings in the town-centre burnt down, as well as kidnappings at international tourist spots including kidnapping three US citizens.

The MILF and the MNLF reject ties with Abu Sayyaf, although more militant members of both groups no doubt support the terrorist organisation. Dr Kamlian quotes MILF and MNLF leaders condemning the activities of Abu Sayyaf as 'un-Islamic' and doing a 'disservice' to Islam.

An additional player in the region writes Eva Lotta Hedman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, saw the turn of the 20th century marked "not only by small pockets of armed resistance from the MILF and MNLF forces but also the resurgence of kidnappings,

bank robberies and various terrorist attacks and atrocities by the shadowy Abu Sayyaf."

The emergence of international terrorism emanating from the Mindanao region, the attack on the twin towers in 2001 and the subsequent 'war on terror' established a convenient pretext for the scaling up of US involvement, whose long-standing interests in the Philippines had never ended.

According to academics like University of Sydney's Dr Winter, US involvement has more to do with securing strategic interests in the region than securing a victory against Abu Sayyaf. "A US Defence Department Quadrennial review from 1997 is explicit in stating where US military presence in the Philippines is keeping open the free lanes of trade," Dr Winter says.

The US is also investing in education, ecological projects and cultural institutions. This 'soft power' is counter balanced by the Saudis, who fund mosques and religious institutions in Mindanao.

“Ethnic conflicts, are always political, they are always about power, money and territory.”

The Philippines Administration of 2002 was welcoming of US involvement. Gloria Arroyo had come to power in 2001 after Estrada was forced from office on corruption charges. She was, says Dr May, 'keen to demonstrate her loyalty and usefulness to the Bush Administration'.

Joint military activity by the two countries escalated, primarily aimed at Abu Sayyaf and foreign terrorists but with some notable clashes between the AFP and the MILF. A UN report says that the increasing casualties, damages and forced displacement in the region attracted little attention in the post-September 2001 world.

'The terrorist bombing campaign in cities across the country was deemed an ample post-facto justification for the prosecution of the Global War on Terror in the southern Philippines,' the report said.

Concurrently Arroyo held peace negotiations with the MILF resulting in formal agreements on various issues including a 2008 Memorandum of Understanding on Ancestral Domain designed to bring an end to the long-running conflict. The memorandum was quickly killed off when it was deemed unconstitutional by the Philippines Supreme Court in October 2008 -a failure to involve many of the non-Moro interests in the negotiations was a major factor in its downfall.

Following the constitutional knock-out, a new round of negotiations began between the Arroyo government and the MILF, negotiations which remain unresolved today. The MILF has resumed armed insurrections while the AFP goes after renegade MILF commanders.

Casualty numbers are low since violent conflict resumed

in 2008 but the massive numbers forcibly displaced is a present day worry only compounding resentment of Manila. Although many internally displaced people have returned to their villages an NGO worker quoted in an International Crisis Group briefing says 'they keep their bags packed, ready to flee when the next mortar hits'.

The group and many South-East Asian experts have voiced concerns about violence and lack of progress alienating MILF and MNLF members, resulting in closer links with aggressive spoilers such as Abu Sayyaf. Such entanglements would only further complicate an already challenging peace process.

The protracted dialogue and failed implementation of successive peace agreements demonstrate the complexity of the task in this southern archipelago. Unresolved differences on the territories to be included in the autonomous region are a major stumbling block.

Other items on the long list of obstacles include non-Muslim groups in the south who do not wish to be ruled by the Moros, an unwillingness to secede to central control by the MILF, clan politics and private armies in Mindanao, and conservatives in Manila who assert a strong republic.

Underlying these factors is the entrenched poverty, disadvantage and disaffection plaguing Mindanao. In 2003 four of the five provinces included in the autonomous region had staggering poverty levels ranging from 38 to 88 percent, making them among the poorest of the 79 provinces of the Philippines.

Findings from the *2008 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey* of the National Statistical Coordination Board in the Philippines found close to half of the families in Mindanao do not have access to safe water and 20 percent are without sanitary toilets.

War and displacement make investment and education nigh on impossible, leading to unemployment and a sense of hopelessness. Paradoxically Mindanao is known as the fruit basket of the Philippines and is rich in natural resources.

The swearing in of newly elected President, Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, son of Filipino heroes Cory and Benigno Aquino, heralds some fresh hopes for future positive dialogue. The MILF is positively inclined towards him, largely based on its high opinion of his parents.

Nevertheless MILF states on its website that "A president has to make hard decisions; and to do that requires foresight, resoluteness, and political will [free of] vested interest groups".

For his part President Aquino said at his swearing in ceremony on 30 June that he would pursue a more inclusive peace process that prevents violence in the South. Mindanao was not a high priority in the hotly contested Presidential campaign and it remains to be seen if Aquino is true to his word.

International actors will have a significant role to play in future negotiations. Malaysia, a recipient of both refugees and overseas workers emanating from its

Mindanao neighbor, will be a key player in peace talks. The Organization of Islamic Conference will continue to have a major influence, as will the US and Saudi Arabia.

An International Monitoring Team (IMT) made up of Malaysia, Brunei, Libya, Japan and Norway have had some success in reducing armed clashes but have so far failed to help produce a new peace agreement between the MILF and Manila.

In addition to security the IMT's brief includes socio-economic, humanitarian and civilian protection, essential elements to be addressed if a lasting peace is to be found.

Australia is taking an increasing interest in trade, aid and cooperation with the Philippines. As academics like Dr Winter points out, the interest is long overdue given the Filipino Diaspora in Australia and the proximity of the republic.

The Australian Government would point to a \$118 million dollar investment in aid in 2010, but Dr May believes there is still a long way to go. "We should be much better, there's lots of expertise in Australia on the Philippines," he said.

Growing interfaith, intercultural and peace groups are also playing their part in healing divisions. The Bishops' Alma Mater conference, the Mindanao People's Peace Movement and Mindanao Peace Weavers demonstrate that pictures of mistrust and divisions along cultural and religious lines in Mindanao are certainly not uniform.

Dr Winter paints a hopeful picture of a new Philippines where feminist, gay, religious and cultural activists sit side-by-side as they work to end the long running tension.

The infamous Ampatuan Clan who held power in central Mindanao and were responsible for the Maguindanao massacre in Mindanao in 2009 appears to have diminished in influence with the election of Governor Esmael 'Toto' Manguadatu. Yet the likelihood of corruption and clan interests dominating government remains high right across the Philippines.

Newer players engaged in the Philippines are China and South Korea which both have major economic interests in the region.

Negotiating across the factionalism of different Moro representatives, bringing the other disparate parties together and healing a centuries old legacy of mistrust will take significant political will.

Dr May quotes Mindanao peace activist Fr Eliseo Mercado "We keep thinking we see light at the end of the tunnel. But as we approach the end of the tunnel all we see is another tunnel".