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Scuttling the gains, globalizing the conflict

The 2003 Yearend Report on the GRP-MILF Peace Process

(When Gloria Macapagal Arroyo assumed the Presidency in 2001, she immediately declared the Philippine Government's commitment to pursue peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This led to the signing of the "General Framework for the Resumption of Peace Talks," in which both sides agreed "to honor, respect and implement" all past agreements and other supplementary agreements signed by both parties. On the first week of March 2002, or barely one year after the framework was signed, peace negotiations abruptly ended amidst charges and countercharges of violations of past agreements. Peace particularly become out of reach in year 2003, after the government dragged the age-old conflict in Mindanao into the new global issue of terrorism. The following yearend report attempts to present, assess and analyze information related to the peace process that affects, in many ways, efforts initiated by various sectors to attain lasting peace in Mindanao.~ Ed.)



SCUTTLED, revived and left in limbo. The erratic development of the peace process in 2003 best illustrates the inconsistent policy of the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in dealing with the MILF. Unlike then-President Joseph Estrada who shut the doors to peace with "total war" offensives, Arroyo portrayed herself to be more liberal, promising an "all-out peace" campaign right after she took her oath as president on 20 January 2001. She later formed an all-Mindanawon peace panel and offered peace gestures to the secessionist group that led to the signing of the "General Framework for the Resumption of Peace Talks."¹ Three formal peace talks were subsequently held in Malaysia, which has been brokering the talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and MILF since Arroyo assumed the Presidency.²

The atmosphere favorable for the peace process was short-lived. Barely one year after Arroyo trumpeted her "peace policy," the government declared in March 2002 the unilateral suspension of peace talks. It set the stage for renewed military offensives. Since then, both war of words and war of bullets ensued and escalated anew in Mindanao.

Dim prospects

At the onset of Year 2003, prospects for the resumption of peace talks looked dim with the heightened military campaigns in areas believed to be strongholds of the MILF. The opening salvo was the government's military assaults in areas within the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in January.

On 10 February 2003, hopes ran high for the peace negotiations to finally take off after the GRP peace panel then headed by Presidential Assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza presented its draft of the final peace agreement with the MILF to Senate President Franklin Drilon and House Speaker Jose de Venecia, in preparation for the resumption of the formal peace talks with the MILF. The same draft was handed over to President Arroyo on the night of 10 February by Executive Secretary Alberto Romulo.³

The following day, an important Islamic celebration of *Eid'l Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice, the military launched air strikes and ground assaults in the municipalities of North Cotabato and Maguindanao along the Liguasan Marsh area. These targeted the Buliok Complex, a residential compound belonging to MILF Chair Hashim Salamat.⁴

Very thin demarcation

Unlike her predecessor who declared an all-out war against the MILF in mid-2000, the Arroyo administration launched the military offensives based on a very thin line demarcating its declared targeted groups and the MILF. The government ordered the attacks on the pretext of running after terrorists and criminals. Yet, the firepower was unleashed on areas identified to be territories of MILF, particularly the Buliok Complex. Prior to the attack, the MILF had claimed the sprawling complex as its new central base after its main camp, Camp Abubakar, fell to the military in 2000 as result of then President Estrada's "total war" campaign.

The massive military assault on MILF's lair coincided with the intensification of the military campaign by the United States (US)-led "coalition of the willing" in Iraq. Pres. Arroyo, an avowed supporter of US President George W. Bush, declared Mindanao as the Philippines' own front of terrorism. The Arroyo administration painted the age-old Mindanao conflict as part and parcel of the global network of terrorism, implying that the military campaign was a preemptive strike against the possibility of attacks against government forces and installations by MILF forces in reaction to the Philippine government's support for the US-led war in Iraq.⁵

The missing links

In the absence of tangible proof to back up the alleged connection of the MILF to terrorist organizations, the government claimed the massive air and ground assaults were not intended for the MILF but were aimed to flush out the elements of the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom group who sought sanctuary in the MILF's lair. Interesting enough, it was only then that the Pentagon was tagged a group of criminals. It was never identified with any terror organization. On the Buliok Complex itself, President Arroyo could only describe it as "the base of operations and refuge area of the notorious Pentagon kidnapping gang and other heavily-armed criminals."

With the government's vague differentiation between MILF and terrorists, President Arroyo appeared to have already foreseen armed clashes with MILF forces. In that case, she pointed out, "our troops will defend themselves against

any force blocking their mission to eliminate gangs in Mindanao."

Anticipated confrontation

If only by the extent of military's war preparation in terms of personnel and logistics, engaging MILF in armed confrontation appeared to have already been well-anticipated. For the manhunt of only 30 members of the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom group, the military deployed 3,000 troops from 3 Infantry Divisions and a Marine Brigade; 20 tanks, six fighter jets and six gunship helicopters. The glaring mismatch of strength against the supposed target of operations heightened the suspicion and resistance of MILF officials who readily took it to mean that they were the real target and not the Pentagon.

Before the attacks on the Buliok Complex, the MILF declared that it has adopted a "passive defense" policy. Its explicit order to its members was "not to initiate any fighting but only retaliate if attacked to defend (themselves)." The picture entirely changed after the complex was overrun by the military. The skirmishes escalated into full-blown hostilities. This time, MILF ground forces were already given the autonomy to "decide and execute actions suited to their respective localities." The offensive mood of the MILF was best emphasized in the 30-minute radio message of MILF Chair Hashim Salamat who ordered all armed and able-bodied Bangsamoro "to fight till death," noting that they are already "pushed to the wall" and they need "to fight back." After Salamat's pronouncements, MILF launched various small-scale counteroffensives in the municipalities of



Tulunan and Carmen in North Cotabato, in Lambayong, Sultan Kudarat, and in Matanog, Maguindanao.

Establishing the links

Linking the Buliok Complex with the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom syndicate did little to build the case of MILF connections with international terrorist organizations. However, the government seemed to have found its case by attributing to MILF most of the bombing incidents in Mindanao, belatedly trying to present tangible examples of its terrorist links. Almost every month, bomb explosions rocked various key areas in Mindanao. In the early part of January 2003, a bomb exploded in Kidapawan City killing 13 people. The following month, a car bomb damaged the Cotabato City Airport and nearby buildings. Another bomb was set off to explode at a market in Kabacan, North

Cotabato. Also in February 2003, two bombs exploded almost simultaneously outside the KCC shopping center in Koronadal, South Cotabato. A series of explosions also toppled the tower of Napocor in Baraga Buenavista, Abaga, Iligan City and destroyed a transmission line linking power stations.⁶ Considered the deadliest terror-linked attack in Mindanao was the bomb explosion on 4 March 2003 outside the Davao International Airport that killed 22 persons and injured 113 others. The weeks after saw other sporadic bombings in other areas, particularly in the provinces of Maguindanao and Cotabato. On 2 April 2003, another bomb exploded at the gate of Davao City's Sasa Wharf, killing 17 people and injuring 58 others. Days later, a bomb exploded in a business shop in Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat, and yet another in Parang, Maguindanao. These were followed by other bombing incidents in other parts of Mindanao, albeit of a lesser degree in terms of the extent of damage and number of casualties.

Aside from the bombing incidents, the government also blamed the MILF for the attack on a civilian-populated area in Siocon, Zamboaga del Norte, that resulted in the death of 96 civilians and injury to 54 others. The MILF consistently denied any involvement in the bombing incidents but admitted to a "tactical blunder" in the Siocon incident.

Embedded terrorists

The spate of bombings in Mindanao and the attack on a civilian-populated area in Siocon further undermined any hope for peace in Mindanao. Immediately after the bomb explosion outside the Davao

International Airport, President Arroyo ordered an "all-out war against terrorism." Although the MILF was not singled out as the targeted group, subsequent pronouncements by government officials identified the MILF with its campaign against terrorism after they categorically stated that terrorists are "embedded with the organ of MILF." Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, who was appointed by President Arroyo as a crisis manager after she declared the Davao Region and Central Mindanao under a "state of lawlessness," particularly placed the blame on the Special Urban Terrorist Action Group (SUTAG), which he described as "under the protection" of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) "but independently performs acts of terrorism."⁷ In an episode of his regular TV program *Gikan sa Masa, Para sa Masa*, he pointed out that the BIAF commanders at the different levels do not exercise operational control and supervision over the operations of SUTAG as these "forms of authority" rest with the SUTAG leadership, which in turn, is also controlled by the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, a regional network of terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda. Thus, with this setup, Duterte concluded: "To say that the MILF did it is not entirely true. To say that the MILF did not do it is not entirely true, either. While the MILF hierarchy did know the identities

of the bombers and about the conduct of the bombing activity, it did not have the authority to choose the location, much less to cancel, the operation."

Exploratory talks

Against the backdrop of heightened military offensives and intensified verbal tussles over MILF's alleged involvement in terror activities, both parties still continued to hold exploratory talks to lay down conditions for the resumption of the formal peace negotiations. Back-channel talks held at the behest of Malaysia sought to cultivate an environment conducive for the formal talks. The negotiations primarily revolved around the implementation of all past agreements; the withdrawal of all military troops in Buliok Complex; and the role of a ceasefire monitoring team organized by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). On 28 March 2003, both parties signed the Joint Statement reiterating their "commitment to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting political settlement on the conflict in Mindanao" and resolving to undertake appropriate steps to pave the way for the resumption of the formal GRP-MILF peace negotiations. The points of agreement ranged from affirmation of existing GRP-MILF agreements, which the secessionist rebels claimed were violated by the military, to mutual restraint by both parties to prevent further incidents of violence in Mindanao. They also agreed to normalize the situation and facilitate the early return of evacuees to their places of origin and allow the rehabilitation to proceed; improve the existing mechanism for monitoring of the cessation of hostilities, including the composition of an observer/monitoring group as provided for



in the "Implementing Guidelines on the Security Aspect of the Tripoli Agreement of 2001"; and reaffirm the provision on the grant of Safety and Security Guarantees to MILF leaders and members who are directly and principally involved in the GRP-MILF peace talks.

Little gains scuttled

These little gains in the peace process were again scuttled by Pres. Arroyo herself when she ordered anew intensified offensives against the MILF and cancelled in the middle of May 2003 even the back-channel contacts with the revolutionary group.⁸ The order was issued the day before she left for a State Visit to the US. The timing of President Arroyo's directive strengthened the belief that the war in Mindanao was only being used in the government's attempt to link the decades-old conflict to the US-led war on terrorism.

After Pres. Arroyo returned from the US, the possibility of both parties formally meeting again at the negotiating table was further stalled with the government's new demands and hardline preconditions. When the agreed-upon parameters drawn from back-channel talks in March reached the level of the Office of the President, President Arroyo further demanded these preconditions: For the MILF to make a public announcement against terrorism, renouncing its linkages to international terror organizations, and for them to turn over the suspects in the Davao twin bombings. Salamat later issued a three-paragraph policy statement "rejecting terror as a means to resolve differences," reiterating that the call of the Arroyo administration on the MILF to renounce terror is "unnecessary as this has been

elevated to public level with our current policy statement" denouncing terrorism. The policy statement declared that "the MILF, as a liberation organization, has repeatedly renounced terrorism publicly as a means of attaining political ends."

As if Salamat's gesture was not enough, Arroyo also asked Salamat to lead the MILF peace panel. The government also refused to drop charges of multiple murder and multiple frustrated murder against Salamat and other MILF officials for the bombings at the Davao International Airport and Sasa Wharf in March and April, and the putting up of million-peso bounties on the head of Salamat and other MILF officials.

Peace talks revived

While debates on preconditions raged on, Pres. Arroyo announced on 18 July 2003 that the government and MILF finally signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement effective the following day to pave the way for the resumption of the formal peace talks. "Peace is at hand," she declared. Aware perhaps that previous efforts to revive past talks had failed, the President sounded an optimistic tone with the new ceasefire. "I ask our people to give peace a chance, even as we secure our absolute sovereignty and the enforcement of the law over all areas and at all times." After announcing the "mutual cessation of hostilities," Arroyo also ordered that same day the Armed Forces of the Philippines to downgrade its operations status with the separatist group from "punitive actions" to active defense and directed the Department of Interior and Local Government to lift the rewards offered for information leading to the arrest of MILF

Chair Hashim Salamat and four other top MILF leaders.

She said the judicial courts would also suspend the warrants of arrest issued against Salamat, Vice Chair for Political Affairs Ghazzali Jaafar, Vice Chair for Military Affairs Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, Spokesperson Eid Kabalu and 144 other MILF leaders and members. The suspension of arrest warrants against top MILF leaders allowed the Philippine government to issue safe conduct passes to the guerilla leaders to enable them to participate in the resumption of formal rounds of peace talks proposed to be held in Malaysia.

Salamat's untimely demise

After the signing of the ceasefire agreement, both parties still failed to resolve the issue of the set of preconditions for the resumption of the formal peace talks. Among the conditions demanded by the government was for the MILF negotiating panel to be headed by Salamat. On the day that the ceasefire agreement was supposed to take effect, Ghazzali Jaafar announced that Salamat would be heading the MILF negotiating panel. *(Salamat, however, already died from cardiac arrest on 13 July 2003 or five days before Jaafar's announcement on the supposed participation of Salamat in the peace talks. His death was only made known by the MILF to the public on 4 August 2003.-Ed.)*

Jaafar said Salamat was persuaded to change his mind and would show up in the negotiation facilitated by the Malaysian authorities, adding that the MILF Central Committee decided to allow Salamat to

serve as the chief negotiator in response to the government's move to suspend arrest warrants for the resumption of peace talks. But MILF Spokesperson Eid Kabalu immediately doused off the enthusiasm of those who were too eager to see Salamat on the negotiating table. He pointed out that as far as their elusive leader is concerned, chairing the MILF peace panel was the least of his concerns. "He trusts Brother Murad. So technically speaking, he has yet to decide. The composition of our panel remains the same as of this time," he said.

The government, on the other hand, insisted that Salamat should head the MILF panel, citing as example the Peace Accord of 1996 inked between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which was directly handled by MNLF Chair Nur Misuari. "MILF Chair Salamat's active participation and presence in the peace negotiation is demanded by the government to ensure that the final peace agreement be binding on the whole organization," said Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Eduardo Ermita. "If talks resume, the government wants Chairman Salamat to sit as chief negotiator so that there would be no more consultation with the Central Committee," he added. The MILF, however, clarified that they have been clear all along on who will head the peace talks. "Chairman Hashim will only lead the negotiations during the final rounds not when it just resumed," stressed Mohagher Iqbal, chief of the MILF's Information Committee.

Arroyo as panel chair

The MILF went even a step further when it floated the idea of having Pres. Arroyo lead the negotiating panel of the government. MILF Central Committee Secretariat Head Jun Mantawil said they want President Arroyo to act as chief negotiator once the formal talks resume for her to face Salamat across the negotiating table. "This is to give the same dose of medicine to the government, which has been demanding that Salamat... head the MILF negotiating panel," he said.

Malacañang responded with an outright rejection of the proposal. "This will never happen," declared Ermita, who suggested that the MILF may only be calling attention to itself. Vice President Teofisto Guingona Jr. also dismissed as "inappropriate" the MILF idea to have Pres. Arroyo lead the government panel and urged the MILF leadership to "keep within the bounds of moderation and avoid interposing difficult, if not unacceptable, preconditions for the resumption of peace talks." He said the



MILF leaders should understand that the objectives of the peace process should be achieved "without such demands which may be misconstrued as a move to show belligerency" on the part of the separatist group. "For anyone to suggest that the negotiations can take place only if President Arroyo headed the GRP panel is a precondition that is misplaced and inappropriate," Guingona said.

United States and Malaysia

Amidst the hoopla accorded the issue of who should lead each of the negotiating panels, Pres. Arroyo announced on 29 July that the formal negotiations will definitely push through "by making use of the good offices of Malaysia in the search of a solution to the conflict" while "looking to the help of the United States in the rehabilitation of conflict areas and the eradication of the roots of war." She was referring to the development aid the US has offered for Mindanao once the MILF signs a peace treaty with the government. Washington has pledged at least 30 million dollars in 2003, another 20 million dollars the following year and "even more once the ink on the final agreement has dried." Arroyo said that financial support from the US as well as corporate donors and the Philippines' official development partners "makes the search (for peace) easier." With the peace funds, she said, the country's strategic partnership with the US "has come full circle from an alliance against terrorism to an alliance for peace."

US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone earlier declared the US was ready to help fund peace efforts in Mindanao and to bring in experienced US diplomats to help with talks with the MILF as part of its

global effort to fight terrorism. He said the US, through the quasi-government US Institute for Peace, is prepared to "witness how the two parties will make commitments, increase confidence in each other and keep those commitments."

Ricciardone said the US role will be to "supplement, not to supplant" the efforts of Malaysia, which has taken the principal role in trying to bring the government and the MILF to the negotiating table. "Malaysia has kept the flames of the peace process warm even when there has been no process. It's the Malaysians who have called the parties to get together again and the United States has no intention of supplanting that. On the contrary, we're interested in supporting the Malaysian leadership role in convening the parties," he said.

Of the pledged amount, the US Congress has already allocated 30 million dollars to "support the peace process in Mindanao." The funds will be in addition to the 74 million dollars development aid already provided this year to the Philippines, through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), more than half of which went to Mindanao. But the financial aid "will only be available if there's peace, if there's an end to violence in the area," said Wendy Chamberlin, USAID assistant administrator for Asia and the Near East.

Optimistic responses

President Arroyo's reassurance on pursuing peace talks and the preceding truce agreement forged by both parties drew optimistic responses from peace



advocates and other key sectors in Mindanao.

The influential Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) praised the decision made by both parties to ink the truce agreement to pave the way for the resumption of formal peace talks. CBCP President and Cotabato Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, also described the lifting of arrest warrants as a positive development for both the government and the MILF as it could significantly signal lasting peace in Mindanao. He lauded the efforts of the Malaysian and US

Governments and members of the OIC to bring the two sides back to the negotiating table. "I hope that in the negotiations, patience and perseverance would reign. Perseverance to downgrade provocations and patience to calmly address complicated issues," said Quevedo who, together with other religious leaders in the Bishops-Ulama Forum and civil society organizations, alliances and institutions, was among the first to ask the government and the MILF for a ceasefire and the resumption of the peace process.

Fr. Bert Layson OMI, who has been very active in taking care of the displaced families in Pikit town, North Cotabato, said the halt in military offensives was a "timely and meaningful decision" for the people of Mindanao. "I am very happy because it means it is the beginning of the resumption of the stalled peace talks. It also shows that the government is sincere in pursuing the peace process," he said. Joji Ilagan-Bian, chairperson of the Mindanao Business Council, said the ceasefire and the decision of both parties to resume peace talks will help restore business confidence in the troubled Mindanao islands and its 20 million people. "This will spur economic development, particularly in the ARMM," said Ilagan-Bian, pointing out that investors may eventually decide to invest in areas where reports of sporadic skirmishes between the MILF and the military have been taking place.

Left in limbo

So much for the hopes expressed by various sectors in Mindanao for the resumption of the peace negotiations. After

the signing of the ceasefire agreement, the entire peace process was virtually left in limbo, marked only by the recurring exchange of barbs from both parties, accusing each other of not fulfilling commitments agreed upon on 28 March 2003 and other preconditions reached in the exploratory talks.

In 16 October 2003, President Arroyo attended the opening rites of the 10th Islamic Summit of heads of states of the OIC. The Summit ended with a Final Communiqué that called on the Philippine Government to "diligently end its military operations" in Mindanao. A week after President Arroyo announced that "peace is within grasp" with the renewed efforts of the government for the resumption of peace talks. Members of the government negotiating panel also said they were only waiting for the end of Ramadhan before talks could be restarted. The Ramadhan ended and both parties have yet to set even a definite date for the holding of another round of exploratory talks that will supposedly iron out issues that stalled the resumption of the formal peace talks. As the year drew to a close, both parties resumed not the formal talks but the war of words that dangerously cultivated an atmosphere conducive to easily igniting a shooting war, again.

Conclusion

The Arroyo administration had initially adopted a more flexible and liberal policy on the peace process, as compared to that of her predecessor. The US-led campaign on terrorism, however, altered the local peace process scenario in Mindanao,

especially after President Arroyo gave her uncritical support to it.

For the first six months of 2003, the government and the MILF were still deadlocked over the preconditions, which were becoming increasingly difficult, if not totally unreasonable. A ceasefire agreement was inked by both parties on 18 July 2003, but the year ended with formal peace negotiations still failing to take off.

The government's massive attack on the Buliok Complex and the reported linkage of MILF to terrorists blamed for the spate of deadly bombing attacks in many parts of Mindanao were the most dominant factors that derailed efforts to bring back the peace process on the negotiating table. It was after the capture of Buliok Complex that the MILF resumed offensives against the government. And it was during the height of the bombing incidents that the government further took a hardline position against the secessionist group. The hostile and provocative acts of the government, the alleged harboring of criminal elements on the part of the MILF, and the provocative pronouncements of both parties undermined their credibility or sincerity in pursuing peace.

In the final analysis, however, it was President Arroyo's fascination with actively participating in the US-led war against terrorism that had the peace-building efforts for the otherwise internal conflict in Mindanao in grave peril.

~ Oreo Santelmo

Endnotes

¹ It was later followed on 22 June 2001 by the "Agreement on Peace" which covers security, rehabilitation and ancestral domain as the three major agenda items. On 7 August 2001, the "Joint Communiqué" which provides for the implementing guidelines on the security aspect and the creation of the local monitoring teams was signed by Presidential Assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza and Vice Chair for Military Affairs Al Haj Murad Ebrahim. By 18 October 2001, the "Manual of Instructions for Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities and the Local Monitoring Teams" was signed at the Mines Resort Hotel in Selangor, Malaysia, by Dureza and Ebrahim.

² Arguillas, Carolyn. 2004. "3 years after People Power II, peace is not within grasp" *MindaNews*, 19 January 2004.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The armed confrontations, which resulted in the displacement of many civilian communities, prompted the nongovernment Mindanao People's Caucus to conduct simultaneous fact-finding missions in the provinces of Lanao, Maguindanao, and Cotabato. Results of the fact-finding missions revealed that both sides violated the ceasefire agreement in which both parties supposedly reaffirmed before the formal peace process was suspended in March 2002. The bulk of the reported violations was placed by the government forces.

⁵ Terrorism is considered a new global phenomenon that emerged after the infamous September 11 event. The US identified Southeast Asia as another front of terrorism after Afghanistan and the Middle East.

⁶ After the transmission lines were destroyed, ninety percent of Mindanao was plunged into darkness.

⁷ The BIAF is the military arm of the MILF. It has operating divisional units spread throughout the areas that the MILF claims as the Bangsamoro homeland.

⁸ It was through back-channel talks in first week of May 2002 that Pres. Arroyo sent Presidential Adviser on Special Concerns Norberto Gonzales to Malaysia where he signed with MILF peace panel member Lanang Ali the controversial Joint Communiqué on the "isolation and interdiction of all criminal syndicates and kidnap-for-ransom groups including so-called 'Lost Commands' operating in Mindanao. The Communiqué provided for the creation of an "ad-hoc joint action group against criminal elements in order to pursue and apprehend such criminal elements." Knowingly or not, the MILF signed the Communiqué which helped cultivate an atmosphere that would justify the government's attack to the Buliok Complex.



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Why Bantaaw?

Mindanao - despite its being a place where natural resources abound, the Land of Promise as the cliché goes - has focalized people's struggles, vigilanteism, structural poverty, among others, for a long time now.

From the looks of it, something is indeed wrong somewhere and a scrutiny is sought why these realities exist and what their undertones are. Hence, treating issues by locating their roots is an imperative.

Bantaaw means "a clear view" in Cebuano.

As such, **Bantaaw** analysis endeavors to explain in terms of implications the reports being presented by both the government and private agencies regarding social and economic activities and priorities, particularly for Mindanao. It aims to ascertain the quality of life of the Mindanao people and chart the actual performance of the different Mindanao regions as compared to the official government reports generalized on the macro level.

It is therefore hoped that as we try to exhaustively cover as many points as possible in Mindanao's social and economic arena, **Bantaaw** could open up angles for further study and discussion - to objectively draw up development efforts fit for the varied conditions of the Mindanao regions.

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