

**WARID:** Philippines (MNLF) 1972-1990

**STARDATE:** 1 December 1972

**ENDDATE:** 31 December 1990

Related cases: Philippines (CPP) 1969-1995

Last update: 13 September 2015

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### **Conflict overview**

Mindanao is the largest of the Philippine islands and belongs – along with the regions of Basilan, Sulu and Palawan – to the disputed southern regions of the Philippines (Rodil 2000: 23, 41). The conflict between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) is rooted in a long history of ethno-religious violence between Christians, on one side, and Muslims and the indigenous people, on the other; this ignited as early as the Spanish and later the American colonization of the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Settler-colonialism in Mindanao by Philippine Christians and the persisting marginalization of the Muslim minority caused the emergence of Moro resistance and eventually led to the formation of the MNLF (Che Man 1990; Kamlian 2004; Kreuzer 2008; Santos 2005). The term ‘Moro’ stems from the Spanish occupation of the Philippines and means ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’. After the Republic of the Philippines had gained independence from the USA in 1946, Moro resistance took an organized form for the first time with the formation of the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) in May 1968. The movement’s political agenda primarily focused on the independence of a Muslim Nation of Mindanao from the central government in the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, a youth section of the movement that was trained in Malaysia formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) under the leadership of Nur Misuari. The organization existed as a secret underground branch of the MIM until the official secession in 1971/72 (Kreuzer/Weiberg 2007). The declared aim of MNLF was the “liberation of the Moro nation” and the formation of “a free and independent state for the Bangsa Moro people” (Misuari 1974; Santos 2005: 4). Until its first military offensive against the government, the MNLF operated as a political under-

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1 For a detailed overview of the Mindanao conflict, see: Tuazon 2008.

2 The case-specific literature does not indicate that the MIM itself waged armed struggle against the central government. The armed conflicts that erupted from 1969-1971 were fought between Christian Ilaga and Muslim Barracuda, both militias being under control of local warlords rather than the ‘guerillas’ or the Philippine armed forces. Violent activities included raiding hamlets, killings, small-scale massacres and terrorist activities. Although state structures such as the police and military forces participated in the violence, it was predominantly directed at members of other ethnic and religious group (Kreuzer/Weiberg 2007: 199-200).

ground movement (in and around Mindanao), and became a popular revolutionary movement by 1972 (Jubair 1999: 159; Kreuzer 2008: 4).

The first rebel military offensive in November 1972 marked the beginning of the civil war between the MNLF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). After 18 years of combat and several rounds of failed peace negotiations, the conflict was finally terminated by the end of 1990: in 1991, the intensity of the conflict fell under the threshold of an armed conflict [**WARENDUC=5**].<sup>3</sup> After the government under President Fidel Ramos was elected, peace talks resumed between the GRP and the MNLF in early 1992. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), casualties from the conflict did not exceed the threshold of 25 annual deaths from 1991 to 1996, which we therefore consider to be the post-war period.<sup>4</sup> The process of negotiations resulted in the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the GRP and MNLF, also referred to as the Jakarta Agreement, on 2 September 1996. Most compromises between MNLF and the Philippine Government were only implemented after the signing of the peace agreement. Since the war was simultaneously reignited between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a splinter-organization of the MNLF, the compromises achieved with the MNLF Agreement cannot be taken into consideration in this case description. Nonetheless, after signing the Peace Agreement, the MNLF never officially resumed its armed struggle against the government until the end of the period under investigation [**WARENDOS=5; WARDUR=217**].

According to the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, 3,634 people were killed due to the civil war between the GRP and MNLF [**FATALUC=4000**].<sup>5</sup> However, the UCDP does not account for the fatalities before 1975; the case-specific literature indicates a significantly higher number of casualties. In the first four years of the civil war alone, the death toll is estimated at 50,000 (Kreuzer 2008: 4). Inamullah Khan, Secretary General of the World Muslim Congress, claimed a number of 60,000 battle-related deaths through 1976 (Santos 2005: 13). When estimating the death toll of the conflict from 1970 to 1996, Congressman Eduardo Ermita, referring to data from the Philippine Armed Forces, has repeatedly been cited by the case literature: “over the period of 26 years since 1970, more than 100,000 persons were killed in the conflict in southern Philippines” (Jubair 1999: 62; Rodil 2000: 8). Since more precise data is not available and since distinguishing between the different kinds of violence caused by

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3 UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset v.2010-1, 1946 – 2009, [http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp\\_conflict\\_termination\\_dataset/](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_conflict_termination_dataset/) (4 Apr 2015).

4 No robust data exists on the death toll regarding these years, forcing us to rely solely on the UCDP estimates.

5 [http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdata/gpcountry.php?id=27&regionSelect=7-Eastern\\_Asia#](http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdata/gpcountry.php?id=27&regionSelect=7-Eastern_Asia#) (4 Mar 2015).

different actors during the war period proves difficult,<sup>6</sup> we comply with this estimate **[FATALOS=100000]**.

According to the 1970 census, the disputed territory<sup>7</sup> was inhabited by nearly 6.1 million people (Concepcion 1974: 84). The official census can be regarded as the best accessible information, as population statistics were divided by region, which was not repeated until 1980 **[PREWARPO=6100000]**. Depending on the estimate taken, the death toll amounts to 0.07% or 1.64% of the pre-war population **[INTENSUC=0.07; INTENSOS=1.64]**.

### **The military balance at the end of the war**

In 1991, the intensity of the conflict between the government and MNLF dropped under the threshold of an armed conflict. As mentioned, the Final Peace Agreement was signed on 2 September 1996 (Santos 2005: 14). No clear military victory can be assigned to the GRP, as the MNLF remained a significant source of threat. Neither side can be considered the military victor of the conflict **[VICTORY=0]**.

Cunningham et al. (2009) claim that the rebels did not control any territory during wartime. According to Salah Jubair,<sup>8</sup> the MNLF launched its strongest attacks between 1972 and 1975: “the MNLF was wresting many areas from the government. Several towns and islets in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, and Zamboanga Peninsula were under MNLF control”. Furthermore, “parallel apparatus of governance” emerged and “the government political machinery virtually ceased to function in these areas” (Jubair 1999: 62). However, after 1975, the government was able to substantially strengthen its position against the rebels, and, in 1975, “the government was able to [...] consolidate positions, especially in the most strategic or critical areas” (Jubair 1999: 166). Following the Tripoli Agreement of 1976, which only achieved a short-lasting ceasefire, combat was mostly dominated by massacres and counter-massacres, as well as “low-intensity guerilla and counter-guerilla [tactics]” (Jubair 1999: 167ff.; Santos 2005: 13). At the same time, the MNLF experienced further fragmentation (Santos 2005: 6). It is difficult to access the exact divisions of territory controlled by the rebels and government troops. According to Peter Kreuzer, MNLF troops still controlled territories at the end of the war, mostly in rural areas in Maguindanao province. Many territories were contested, with the state controlling the major roads and the guerillas controlling the terrain. The situation was further complicated by the fact that many territories were also under the control of MILF or

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6 As Francesco Lara Jr. and Phil Champain (2009) point out, not only rebellion-related violence but also inter- and intra-clan conflict remain persisting sources of violence and cause numerous deaths in Mindanao.

7 In the 1970 census, the relevant territory covered northern and southern Mindanao.

8 ‘Salah Jubair’ is the pseudonym for Mohagher Iqbal, one of the most influential commanders of the MILF, a long-time leader of the negotiations with the government and former member of MNLF.

by warlords holding official government positions (e.g. as mayor), while actually controlling the territory through their clans. Much of the local police and militias were paid by the state but were actually committed to upholding clan control. The regions of Maguindanao – along with Lanao del Sur and del Norte and especially Sulu, Basilan and other outlying islands – can still be described as being only partially under governmental control. In sum, by the end of the war, the MNLF can be considered one of the parties that exercised military and civil control over disputed territories during the war and the post-war periods. The government, however, controlled more of the important territory **[REBTERR=1; MORETERR= -1]**.<sup>9</sup>

Cunningham et al. (2009) state that the fighting capacity of the rebel side was ‘low’ **[REBFIGHT= -1]**. After the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, a renewed ceasefire and a second round of negotiations were initiated between the new government of President Aquino and the MNLF, resulting in the Jeddah Accord on 3 January 1987. Even though the accord promised to “grant full autonomy” to 23 provinces of the Bangsa Moro homeland, the government insisted on a plebiscite among the affected people (cf. Kamlian 2004; Santos 2005: 7). Both MNLF and its splinter MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) opposed the proceedings, as the plebiscite allowed for the majority Christian population in the disputed regions to vote against the membership in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Negotiations broke down in May 1987 and the MNLF returned to armed struggle for full independence of Bangsa Moro in February 1988 (Kamlian 2004; Kreuzer 2008: 4). The ARMM was still unilaterally established by the government, and the plebiscite of 1989 resulted in the membership of four provinces in the ARMM.<sup>10</sup> On the ground, the ARMM had no factual influence and came to represent “simply an extra bureaucratic layer between themselves and Manila” for many people in the ARMM (Gutierrez 2003; Kamlian 2004).

As of 1990, during the last weeks of fighting, the MNLF did not have capacities to fight in a more than sporadic manner and to conduct more than occasional attacks (Schneider 2005: 125). However, the low-intensity guerilla tactics had been the mode of fighting used by MNLF since the late 1970s, and there was no indication that the movement had significantly been weakened or ‘lost steam’ in the last weeks of combat. We therefore conclude that both sides were able to continue fighting by the end of the war at a similar intensity as before **[CONFFIGHT=0]**.

Nur Misuari, the leading figure of MNLF, played a crucial role in negotiating the Final Peace Agreement with the Philippine Government in 1996 (cf. Rodil 2000: 123ff.). As of the last

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9 Cf. Kreuzer/Weiberg 2007: 387-430; Kreuzer 2011: 20-32.

10 <http://www.armm.gov.ph/history/> (24 Apr 2015)

months of the conflict, neither the government's nor the rebel's leadership was killed or captured [**LEADER=0**].

In conclusion, the military balance at the end of war was mainly to the advantage of the government [**WARBAL= -0.17**].

### **The post-war military balance**

The integration of MNLF fighters into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and into the Philippine National Police (PNP)<sup>11</sup> – which was agreed upon in the Tripoli Agreement 1976 – was only implemented after the Jakarta Accord of 1996 (cf. May 2001: 268). At that point, the Philippine Government launched a program that integrated 5,750 MNLF fighters into its armed forces and 1,750 into the national police.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the military situation of the warring parties did not change substantially during the period relevant for this case description. Rebel forces did not substantially participate in the national army or police [**STATEFOR 1991-1995= -1**].

Accordingly, both parties sustained separate armed forces throughout the post-war period [**SEPFORCE 1991-1995=0**]. The government's forces were always much stronger than MNLF's Bangsa Moro Army. In 1990, the government commanded 108,500 active soldiers, while the rebels' strength was estimated at 15,000 (IISS 1991: 177-178). During the post-war period, the imbalance in favor of the government significantly increased (IISS 1992-1996). In 1996, the state military comprised 110,500 active soldiers, whereas the rebels were reported to have about 5,000 combatants [**TROOPS 1991-1992=0, TROOPS 1993-1995= -1**]. Unfortunately, we lack data to compare the equipment of the two former warring parties [**ARMS 1991-1995=n.d.**]

As the MNLF predominantly engaged in guerilla combat when attacking government troops and did not effectively control any territory, the disputed regions in the southern Philippines remained under the control of the government during the post-war period [**TERRCON 1991-1995= -1; TERRWIN 1991-1995= -1**] Accordingly, the MNLF can be considered the more vulnerable party in terms of territorial control [**VULNERAB 1991-1995= -1**].

During the whole post-war period, there were no peacekeeping troops deployed in the Philippines [**PEACKEEP 1991-1995=n.r.**].<sup>13</sup>

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11 Rodil 2000: 129.

12 Bolte et al. 2003: 34; Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue/Institute of Bangsamoro Studies 2011: 47; Santos et al 2010: 167.

13 Lingga 2003.

The USA had maintained military bases on the Philippines. In November 1992, the last US troops left the country due to a decision by the Philippine Senate to terminate the US military presence (Brillantes 1993: 224, 228). Despite this decision, the USA and the Philippines still maintained strong ties during the whole period. Treaties between the USA and the Philippines were aimed at defense against external enemies.<sup>14</sup> However, US support to the Philippine government mainly focused on internal insurgencies such as military training and weapons supplies. In the very hypothetical case that the MNLF had managed to come close to defeating the government in a new war, the USA would have intervened on the government's side [P5ALLY 1991-1996= -1].<sup>15</sup>

In sum, the military balance in the post-war period was predominantly in favor of the government [POSTBAL 1991-1992= -0.71, POSTBAL 1993-1995= -0.86]. Taken together, the data on the military balance at the end of the war and during the post-war period result in a strong military advantage for the Philippine Government [BALANCE 1991-1992= -0.44, BALANCE 1993-1995= -0.51].

## Economy

The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increased constantly in the post-war period.

Table 1: GDP per capita in current USD<sup>16</sup>

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>GDP per capita</i>
1991	63,476,449	716
1992	64,996,507	815
1993	66,517,085	817
1994	68,050,807	942
1995	69,606,539	1065

## The scale of compromise after the war

Throughout the war, the MNLF repeatedly withdrew from its maximum demand for full independence for Muslim Mindanao but returned to this demand as the negotiations with the government broke down. Nevertheless, full autonomy for the Bangsa Moro homelands and the establishment of an autonomous and efficient government on the islands of Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan were crucial demands on the MNLF agenda (Kamlian 2004). Although the establishment of the ARMM would have allowed the MNLF to exercise

14 [http://www.chanrobles.com/mutualdefensetreaty.htm#.VEDOdv1\\_tyw](http://www.chanrobles.com/mutualdefensetreaty.htm#.VEDOdv1_tyw) and [http://www.chanrobles.com/visitingforcesagreement1.htm#.VEDj6fl\\_tyw](http://www.chanrobles.com/visitingforcesagreement1.htm#.VEDj6fl_tyw) (15 Dec 2014).

15 Jubair 1999: 174.

16 <http://api.worldbank.org/v2/en/country/phl?downloadformat=excel> (21 May 2015).

autonomy in the disputed regions to some extent, it refused to accept the limited scope of the autonomy granted and did not participate in the ARMM regional government inaugurated in 1990 or in the central government of the Philippines [**GOVERN 1991-1995= -1**]. Accordingly, only the central government of the Philippines made political decisions within the disputed territory of Mindanao [**VETO 1991-1995= -1; VETOSAT 1991-1995=n.r.**]. After the signing of the Final Peace Agreement in 1996, MNLF leader Misuari was elected Regional Governor of the ARMM.<sup>17</sup>

The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines provided for free and fair elections. Elections for the regional officials of the ARMM were held in February 1990 and the first governmental elections in the post-war period took place in 1992. However, the MNLF was not a political party and was therefore unable to take part in any political processes as an organization or to present candidates for elections from its ranks until the Final Peace Agreement in 1996 [**ELECT 1991-1995= -1**].<sup>18</sup> However, prior to the peace accord, single members of the MNLF ran for elections as members of national political parties on whose support they depended. MNLF cadres held, amongst other, the seat of the Governor of ARMM and the majority of seats in the ARMM regional legislative assembly (Santos et al 2010: 331).

The independence of the Mindanao region was the initial aim of the MNLF. The establishment of the ARMM signifies the willingness of the GRP to compromise with the rebels, although the ARMM practically remained an “empty bureaucratic structure” without any executive power [**EXBORDER 1991-1995=0**].<sup>19</sup> Even though the MNLF mainly struggled for the independence of Muslim Mindanao, the establishment and the internal borders of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao was also an issue of dispute. The region of autonomy unilaterally granted by President Marcos in 1976 was substantially smaller than the ARMM after the peace agreement of 1996. Also, as a result of the referenda conducted among the concerned populations, many territories and cities were excluded, such as the supposed capital of the ARMM, Cotabato City, which ended up not becoming part of the ARMM. Despite the concessions by the Philippine state, the government can be considered as the party that prevailed on this issue before the final peace agreement with the MNLF in 1996 [**INBORDER 1991-1995= -1**].

The Philippine Government granted autonomy rights to the ARMM but the power of the regional government was limited. Kreuzer and Weiberg (2007: 207) point, for instance, to the

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17 <http://www.armm.gov.ph/history/> (11 Jun 2015).

18 Kreuzer 2008: 4; Santos 2005: 10.

19 Constitution 1987: Article X.

governor's lack of discretionary power. Moreover, as of the negotiations with the Aquino government in 1987, the MNLF demanded the powers of taxation for the autonomous government, with a share of 85% of the total tax income (Kamlan 2004). The ARMM, however, was denied the possibility of administering economic resources in the region. In sum, the government made minor concessions [**COMPETEN 1991-1996=0**].<sup>20</sup>

The MNLF also discussed socio-economic problems such as the domination of Muslim clans, the distribution of ancestral lands and weak economic development. The Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) was established after the Final Peace Agreement in 1996, focussing on peace and development efforts. Until then, these issues had only been dealt with by the Philippine Government in a sporadic manner. Within the ARMM, the situation became even more problematic when the controversial clans held high governmental positions (Kreuzer 2008: 4; Kreuzer 2004: 300; Tuminez 2007: 82). Thus, the interests of the government prevailed [**ECONOMY 1991-1995= -1**].

Promoting the rights of the Muslim community in the Philippines was a crucial demand for the MNLF. However, these claims can be subsumed under the MNLF struggle for the self-determination of the Muslim minority in Mindanao, and are not considered a separate issue [**SPECPRO 1991-1995=n.r.**].<sup>21</sup>

No other crucial issues were disputed by the parties during or after the war [**ISSUE 1991-1995=n.r.; ISSUE2 1991-1995=n.r.; NEWCON1 1991-1995=n.r.; NEWCON2 1991-1995=n.r.**]. The only arrangement between the GRP and MNLF that can be considered a compromise and was implemented before the 1996 Final Peace Agreement regarded the status of the disputed territory in the southern Philippines. The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was initially a concession that was unilaterally implemented by the government and did not satisfy the ambitions of the MNLF for a de facto autonomous and self-governed region for the Muslim minority in the Philippines; it thus clearly benefited the government side [**BENEFIT 1991-1995= -1; BENEFIT2 1991-1995= -1**].

In sum, post-war order clearly favored the government [**COMPROM 1991-1995= -0.75**].

### **The stability of peace**

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which splintered from the MNLF in 1984 under the leadership of Salamat Hashim (Jubair 1999: 156; Santos 2005: 5), did not participate in the GRP-MNLF peace process and continued armed resistance for an independent Muslim Mindanao

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20 Kreuzer/Werning 2007: xiii; Loewen 2005: 4.

21 Makinano/Lubang 2001.



(ICG 2004: 30; Kreuzer 2008). For 1994, the UCDP counted 104 battle-related deaths. In 1996, the violence passed the threshold of 25 fatalities per calendar year again. In the succeeding years, the conflict fulfilled our definition of a war defined by at least 1,000 fatalities.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the relative peace in the southern Philippines was short-lived [**SAMEWAR=1; DATESAME=1 Jan 1996; PEACMON1=60; ANYWAR=1; DATEANY=1 Jan 1996; PEACMON2=60**]. However, it is noteworthy that the separate peace that was negotiated with the MNLF remained stable, and the organization never resumed combat with the Philippine Government.

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22 <http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdata/gpcountry.php?id=127&regionSelect=11-Oceania#> (21 May 2015). Cf. Tuminez 2007: 81.

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## Annex

Table 2: Troops in the Philippines 1990-1995 (IISS 1991-1996)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Government</i> <sup>23</sup>	<i>Bangsa Moro Army</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	
1990	108500	15000	7.23	1
1991	106500	15000	7.1	1
1992	106500	3300	32.27	1
1993	106500	3300	32.27	1
1994	106500	3300	32.27	1
1995	107500	5000	21.5	1

23 The numbers only include active troops.