



Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro

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Principal Findings

What's new? Two years into a three-year transition, the “normalisation” process that aims to disarm ex-rebels and pay peace dividends to the Philippines’ Bangsamoro region is behind schedule, partly because of COVID-19. Manila has recently taken steps to restore the momentum, but time is of the essence.

Why does it matter? Normalisation has several essential components, including supplying socio-economic support, deploying peacekeeping teams to boost conflict mitigation efforts and disbanding private militias. Whether or not the government extends the 2022 deadline for the political transition, delays in carrying out these measures could frustrate former insurgents and raise the risk of violence.

What should be done? Both sides should urgently keep working to fulfil the peace deal’s core provisions. The government should redouble efforts to deliver economic and other benefits while helping local authorities address security threats. The ex-rebels should press ahead with disarmament. Donors should increase their development support at this crucial juncture.

Executive Summary

The peace process in the Bangsamoro, the majority-Muslim region of the southern Philippines, requires disarming some 40,000 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters and ensuring both their smooth integration into civilian life and peace dividends for communities where they live. Two years into a three-year transition period mapped out in a 2014 peace agreement, progress toward these goals, which the deal describes as “normalisation”, is lagging. Fewer than one third of the former guerrillas have laid down their weapons, and Manila has been slow to distribute to them the economic packages meant to entice them to cooperate. With the clock ticking toward 2022 elections that will mark the transition period’s official end, both sides need to up the tempo. The government should accelerate socio-economic support to former rebels and work to disband private armies that could threaten the deal. The MILF should move ahead with disarmament’s next phase despite delays. Donors should boost support for development projects that benefit communities, while ensuring that such projects do not inadvertently fuel tension.

As enshrined in the 2014 peace agreement, the transition launched in 2019 in the newly created Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has two tracks. One is a political process, geared at building regional institutions via an interim government, set to conclude in 2022. The other is a broader normalisation agenda, designed to ensure sustainable peace and development for the Bangsamoro’s population after decades of war; it focuses on deliverables rather than a strict timeline, though it is meant to be closely tied to the political track. The peace deal’s roadmap for the normalisation agenda treats its different elements as of equal importance. Disarmament and other security-related matters are on a par with confidence-building measures, development initiatives intended to ensure that locals enjoy a peace dividend, and transitional justice efforts intended to help communities in the BARMM address and move past conflict-related wounds and grievances.

In part because of COVID-19, the parties are struggling to make progress on the roadmap’s targets. While they reached a milestone in disarming 12,000 ex-rebel combatants in early 2020, roughly two thirds who should decommission remain under arms, and there are signs that the MILF may be baulking about moving to the process’s next phase. The ex-rebels are growing impatient with the government’s failure to distribute promised economic packages and delays in bringing development programs to camps where many of their members live. Crucial security measures contemplated by the peace deal, particularly the dissolution of private armies controlled by local power brokers and the deployment of jointly managed local peacekeeping teams, are still at a nascent stage of implementation. Some of these problems were surfacing even before the pandemic. But COVID-19 has made things worse, distracting both regional and national authorities. The hold-ups prompted a debate about whether to extend the transition period past its 2022 deadline, which in recent months has consumed too much of the parties’ time.

Further setbacks to normalisation may increase prospects that MILF fighters return to combat or that other militants endanger the fledgling BARMM. There are plenty of armed groups in the Bangsamoro that might exploit the moment’s fragility.

A loss of momentum could also threaten what are currently reasonably peaceful relations among the majority Moro Muslims, Christians and other ethno-religious groups. To bolster the flagging peace process and help Bangsamoro reap its benefits:

- ❑ The Philippine government should fast-track the promised socio-economic assistance to decommissioned combatants, both to reassure disgruntled ex-guerrillas that they will enjoy a peace dividend, and to signal to the MILF that Manila remains committed to the 2014 peace agreement.
- ❑ Manila should also work with the interim Bangsamoro government, led by the MILF, to address security concerns that could make ex-rebels reluctant to yield their arms. Most importantly, it should disband private armies loyal to local power brokers, deploy joint peacekeeping teams that include soldiers, police officers and MILF cadre members, and clarify these teams' exact function, which is likely to involve the local coordination of conflict mitigation efforts by state security forces and the MILF-led interim government.
- ❑ Although extending the transition past its current 2022 deadline seems likely under the circumstances, the MILF should stick to the decommissioning roadmap in the 2014 peace agreement. It should also work with the Independent Decommissioning Body to resolve potential frustrations with Manila and encourage its combatants to participate in the process, including by sharing information about normalisation with them to avoid any dangerous misconceptions.
- ❑ The interim regional government should contribute by institutionalising mechanisms to resolve land conflicts and clan feuds. It should also seek to improve the situation of vulnerable minorities in its territory by passing legislation to protect them from violence.
- ❑ Foreign donors should contribute to the new Normalisation Trust Fund mechanism to support development initiatives that benefit communities and help mitigate conflict risks. These include locally tailored projects not only in the six major MILF camps but also in other conflict-affected areas both in and outside the BARMM.

By taking these steps, the parties can both show their strengthened commitment to normalisation in the Bangsamoro and help keep the vital process on track.

Manila/Brussels, 15 April 2021

Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro

I. Introduction

For some 40 years, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) pursued a strategy of guerrilla warfare and, as the conflict wore on, intermittent negotiations with the Philippine government. Fighting affected parts of mainland Mindanao and smaller islands in the southern Philippines, an area known together as the Bangsamoro. In 2014, the insurgents, representing the Moro Muslim community, finally achieved their primary goal, signing a peace agreement with the Philippine government providing for self-rule. The creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in March 2019 inaugurated a three-year transition period that is to lead to elections in the newly autonomous region.¹ In the meantime, as stipulated in the 2014 treaty, the ex-rebels are heading an interim government, known as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.²

The product of decades of negotiations, the 2014 peace agreement laid out a “dual” process: a political transition, which designates the former rebels to steer the interim government in building the autonomous region’s institutions, and a “normalisation” agenda, which includes a wide range of measures designed to support the newly created region in its evolution from war to peace. While the political track is supposed to end with regional elections in 2022, the peace agreement does not fix a timeline for the completion of normalisation, focusing instead on qualitative benchmarks.³ The text specifies that both parties need to sign an “Exit Agreement” once all commitments have been fulfilled.

The disarmament of ex-MILF rebels – or decommissioning – is just one part of this complex process. Other measures aim to boost economic development across the Bangsamoro, build trust among locals in conflict-affected pockets, dissolve other militias and support transitional justice arrangements. Both Manila and the MILF are to meet their obligations at the same time, with normalisation moving in parallel

¹ For background on the peace process, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 306, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, 14 April 2020; 301, *The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, 27 June 2019; 281, *The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao*, 6 July 2016; 248, *The Philippines: Dismantling Rebel Groups*, 19 June 2013; and 240, *The Philippines: Breakthrough in Mindanao*, 5 December 2012.

² The Bangsamoro refers to the indigenous Muslim population of the southern Philippines, comprising thirteen ethno-linguistic groups that converted to Islam, as well as to non-Muslim indigenous people who are also called Lumad. It also refers to the BARMM’s territory. The BARMM comprises the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao, both on Mindanao island, as well as three smaller island provinces in the Sulu archipelago, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. It also includes Cotabato City on Mindanao and 63 villages that formerly belonged to Mindanao’s Cotabato province.

³ In the lead-up to the peace agreement, the MILF asked for a six-year transition but later agreed to three years as compromise.

with the political track.⁴ As the MILF's chief negotiator, Mohagher Iqbal, put it: "These are two sides of the same coin. ... One cannot proceed without the other".⁵

For a time, decommissioning was moving ahead roughly as planned, but implementation hiccups and then COVID-19's arrival in the Philippines have caused delays that could sap the parties' confidence in the peace process. Meanwhile, other aspects of normalisation are behind schedule.

This report examines the status of decommissioning efforts, and the normalisation process more broadly, against the backdrop of the debate that has emerged over whether or not to extend the transition period past 2022. It draws on research in the Bangsamoro and Manila, conducted between late 2019 and early 2021, including interviews with MILF commanders, national and local officials, military officers, civil society representatives, development officials and practitioners, villagers, representatives of the interim regional government, clan members and international observers. It was not possible to meet decommissioned combatants due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Research also drew on government records and webinars conducted on the peace process during the pandemic.

⁴ This stipulation appears both in Section IX of the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro ("shall not be implemented unilaterally") as well as in the "Principles of Implementation" in the 2014 treaty.

⁵ "Quoted in "Rapid Midterm Review of the Bangsamoro Transition Period", Mindanao Peoples Caucus, October 2020, p. 28.

II. The Bangsamoro Transition So Far

In its first two years, the political track of the Bangsamoro's transition to autonomy has made considerable headway. The interim government has set up key institutions and begun erecting the legal framework of self-rule. But obstacles have arisen – especially of late – that could jeopardise progress. Meanwhile, the spectre of renewed conflict hovers over the region, as not only disaffected former MILF guerrillas but also other armed actors could seek to exploit disorder if the transition stumbles.

A. *The First Two Years*

There have been several accomplishments on the political track since the BARMM's creation in 2019. Led by the MILF, the interim government approved a Transition Plan and a Bangsamoro Development Plan that set the terms of its tenure until 2022. The Bangsamoro cabinet is in place, and the regional parliament is, according to some members, a more efficient law-making body than its predecessor.⁶ The crucial task of drafting priority legislation that will govern the BARMM after 2022 is under way: of the seven bills planned, two have passed and five are in the pipeline.⁷

After some initial delay, the Intergovernmental Relations Body, a mechanism designed to ensure smooth coordination between Manila and the interim government, is also operational and taking an increasingly important role in sorting out disputes between the regional and national governments. Composed of senior MILF officials and heads of national departments and agencies, it has created a welcome platform for BARMM officials to raise their concerns with Manila. Both sides are also working to ensure fiscal autonomy for the region, consistent with a key provision of the peace treaty and the 2018 legislation that underwrites the BARMM's autonomy, the Bangsamoro Organic Law.⁸

The political roadmap was thus largely on track until early 2020, when COVID-19 brought disruptions.⁹ With the virus infecting people and prompting lockdowns throughout the region, the Bangsamoro government had no choice but to shift to emergency response mode, and it did so rather well.¹⁰ But while its efforts demonstrated a capacity to govern effectively, winning praise from the central government,

⁶ Crisis Group online interviews, interim government officials, 1 and 5 March 2021. Prior to the BARMM, the region had a Regional Legislative Assembly.

⁷ So far, the parliamentarians have passed the administrative and civil service codes. Three other codes, on education, indigenous people and local government, are at committee level – ie, still to be fine-tuned and in need of consultation with officials and citizens across the Bangsamoro. Revenue and electoral codes are also under deliberation.

⁸ At present, the BARMM relies on the national government for disbursements under the Bangsamoro Block Grant, a large subsidy (about 63.6 billion Philippine pesos) from Manila that amounts to 5 per cent of the Philippines' net internal revenue. The grant is disbursed monthly to the BARMM.

⁹ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader, 14 February 2021.

¹⁰ Compared to other Philippine regions, the BARMM did well in managing the pandemic. The interim government disbursed funds to local government units for quick response, built isolation centres for testing and treatment, and averted the worse public health outcomes. Miyoko Taniguchi, "From rebels to rulers: the challenges of the Bangsamoro government in Mindanao", *The Diplomat*, 12 August 2020.

the interim government lost precious time from its three-year implementation period.¹¹ The pandemic has, for example, dramatically slowed the already complicated process of staffing the regional administration. The BARMM started up a Bangsamoro Job Portal in December 2019, receiving up to 300,000 applications, but many positions remain vacant.¹² The short staffing has led to bureaucratic delays in the provision of public services which, in turn, corrode people's trust in the MILF-led authority.¹³

The pandemic has also sparked a debate about whether the transition should be extended. The question arose after a local non-governmental organisation, the Mindanao Peoples Caucus, conducted a mid-term assessment of the interim government's performance and recommended an extension, on account of both the BARMM's early birthing pains and the time lost in dealing with the coronavirus.¹⁴ The MILF, which is keen to burnish its governance record as much as possible before it faces voters at the polls, was quick to seize this chance for extra time. It started lobbying both Bangsamoro politicians and lawmakers in Manila to lengthen the interim period and postpone elections until 2025.¹⁵ President Rodrigo Duterte and his main peace process adviser, Carlito "Charlie" Galvez, have both come out in support of the extension, but they emphasise that the final decision lies with Congress, which is now examining several related bills.¹⁶

The extension debate has sown division in the Bangsamoro. Some of the region's influential clan leaders have backed the MILF's call for a longer transition, while other strongmen have been critical of the ex-rebels' campaign.¹⁷ In late February, a group of senators convened a first meeting between the MILF and some of the region's political heavyweights to work toward an intra-Moro consensus.¹⁸ Failure to find one would bring extreme uncertainty to the Bangsamoro project, heightening tensions between the MILF and powerful clans, as well as raising questions about Manila's capacity to manage the peace process.

Congress giving the transition more time would allow the MILF to keep building the region's institutions and further demonstrate its ability to govern before facing the voters for the first time. But should legislators reject the extension, whether on

¹¹ See Martin Sadongdong, "Galvez commends Muslim Mindanao's Covid-19 response", *Manila Bulletin*, 26 August 2020.

¹² "Peace Conversations for the Bangsamoro", webinar, Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 23 September 2020.

¹³ The interim government is heavily criticised for the slow hiring process in the new Bangsamoro administration. It is also faulted by bureaucrats of its predecessor entity, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, who faced delays in receiving their severance pay. Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society leaders from Sulu and Lanao del Sur, 25 February and 5 March 2021.

¹⁴ There were, in particular, delays in setting up the Intergovernmental Relations Body, as well as budgetary and staffing issues in the transition from the previous administration to the BARMM.

¹⁵ Parliamentary elections in the Bangsamoro must be synchronised with national elections, as stipulated in Article XVI, Section 13 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

¹⁶ The interim government filed an extension resolution, while individual congressmen from the Bangsamoro and other politicians from Mindanao and Manila introduced bills of their own.

¹⁷ Critics pointed out that the MILF did not reach out to the heavyweights who objected to extension, which helped produce the stalemate in the first place. Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader from Lanao, 25 February 2021.

¹⁸ Several provincial governors as well as Basilan's congressional representative, Mujiv Hataman, attended the meeting, after which MILF leaders paid visits to Manila.

account of internal Bangsamoro opposition or other issues, the MILF will likely struggle to juggle governance with consolidating its newly founded political party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party, and preparing for the 2022 polls. With their political future at stake, chances are that the ex-rebels would focus on campaign preparations and neglect such tasks as the legal codes yet to be passed and, more broadly, governance in the transition's final phase.¹⁹

In the meantime, the normalisation process is also, as detailed below, moving slowly. Normalisation is not strictly bound by the 2022 deadline; the crafters of the 2014 peace agreement were careful not to impose a timetable on this complex process and the Bangsamoro Organic Law adopted in 2018 further formalised the separation of the political and normalisation tracks. Still, as COVID-19 has impeded normalisation's progress, locals are increasingly worried about the disconnect between the two tracks.²⁰ The extension debate has therefore raised questions about whether authorities should postpone the 2022 elections due to the delays in the normalisation process.²¹

Whatever the final justification, an extension may, at this point, be inevitable. While it is an imperfect solution to the present problems, it could buy much needed time at a delicate juncture and reduce the risk of the alternative: a combination of rushed elections, uncertainty regarding normalisation after 2022, and a corresponding increase in the risk of intra-Moro conflict. Ensuring that an extension does not do more harm than good, however, rests on two fundamental requirements: first, it needs to be supported by a broad Bangsamoro consensus, and secondly, Manila needs to make a final decision quickly in order to avoid further unpredictability on both tracks.²²

B. *The Spectre of Conflict*

Bangsamoro is no longer at war, but it has yet to achieve a stable peace. A reminder of how fragile the situation remains came in late February 2021, when a group of MILF fighters briefly clashed with soldiers of the 64th Infantry Battalion in Sumisip town, Basilan province, leaving three persons injured.²³ But for now, the biggest threats to regional stability come from the militant groups that operate across parts of the region.

In Maguindanao province and the neighbouring Special Geographic Area located in the former Cotabato province, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a MILF splinter group which has since fragmented into three factions, is of particular con-

¹⁹ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader, 25 February 2021.

²⁰ Article XVI, Section 1 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law declares that the "transition period shall be without prejudice to the initiation or continuation of other measures that may be required by post-conflict transition and normalisation even beyond the term of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority".

²¹ See Louie Montalbo, "The two tracks of the Bangsamoro peace process and the extension transition question", *Rappler*, 15 February 2021; and Yasmira P. Moner, "Making Peace Work with the Bangsamoro: Imperatives of the BTA Extension", *Access Bangsamoro*, 17 March 2021.

²² At the time of writing, the Philippine Congress had adjourned and was expected to resume sessions on 17 May.

²³ The confrontation seems to have been triggered by a feud between MILF elements and a village official. The army's subsequent arrival took the guerrillas by surprise. Maricel Cruz, "Panels urged: probe gun battle", *Manila Standard*, 4 March 2021.

cern.²⁴ At least one faction has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) and all three continue to stage attacks on military detachments.²⁵ The group evades army patrols by retreating into an expanse of mountains and marshland.

Additionally, in Lanao del Sur province, the 2017 showdown between a local jihadist group and government forces that wracked the city of Marawi continues to cast a shadow. Remnants of the ISIS-inspired Maute Group, which had waged a five-month battle against the army that displaced 400,000 people and turned Marawi into a war zone, have regrouped in the Lanao del Sur hinterlands.²⁶ The group has drastically shrunk in size and largely returned to its early modus operandi of ambushing military personnel. But it continues to recruit, both in remote municipalities and in evacuation centres housing families still displaced by the 2017 crisis.²⁷

Further south, in the Sulu archipelago, the Abu Sayyaf Group, a criminal-cum-militant network, remains active. While incidents involving the group have declined since mid-2020, partly thanks to military operations in Sulu and stronger law enforcement in Basilan by the provincial authorities, public perceptions of security have not risen in parallel. Locals also complain that law enforcement efforts interfere with their livelihoods. A youth leader from Patikul town in Sulu province highlighted that continual military and police raids make farming and other economic activity very challenging.²⁸

The prevalence of community conflicts in the Bangsamoro also raises major concerns about the region's future stability. Despite the COVID-19 lockdowns, a flare-up of clan feuds, or *ridos*, that had started in 2019 continued into 2020.²⁹ Police statistics show that 80 per cent of *ridos* are related to land.³⁰ Land-related conflicts in areas populated by indigenous people, as non-Islamised ancestral communities in the Bangsamoro are called, also occur with some frequency, particularly in Magu-

²⁴ The Special Geographic Area refers to the 63 villages in the former Cotabato province over which the BARMM gained formal jurisdiction in late November 2019 following a referendum held on 8 February of that year.

²⁵ This faction, led by Esmal Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraiife, is known both as Jamaatul al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar and Daulah Islamiyah-Toraiife Group, the moniker used by the military. See Bong Sarmiento, "Islamic State's new frontline in the Philippines", *Asia Times*, 22 November 2017. The MILF fought this faction in the past and has on occasion subtly supported the military's campaign against the group through information sharing. At the same time, it offers its splinter groups' combatants the possibility to return to the main organisation and benefit from the peace dividends. Crisis Group analyst's interviews and observations in a previous capacity, 2018-2019.

²⁶ For more details on the Maute Group, see Crisis Group Report, *Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 3-5. In April 2019, the Philippine army killed Abu Dar, the Maute Group's leader. See Carmela Fonbuena, "Leader of Isis in Philippines killed, DNA tests confirm", *The Guardian*, 14 April 2019. The Marawi conflict also affects Lanao del Norte, a Mindanao province that is not part of the BARMM.

²⁷ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader, 25 February 2021. Katrina Auditor, "Marawi rehabilitation delays could cast a dark shadow over Duterte's peace legacy", *The Diplomat*, 7 December 2020.

²⁸ Crisis Group online communication, 26 February 2021.

²⁹ Data collected by Crisis Group. Crisis Group online interviews, 14 and 23 February 2021.

³⁰ John Unson, "Security sector: good land administration can prevent clan wars in BARMM", NDBC News, 26 February 2021.

indanao province.³¹ In early 2021, for example, fighting erupted in the town of South Upi, pitting Moro Muslims against members of the Teduray-Lambangian indigenous group.³²

³¹ Crisis Group online communication, community leader, 25 February 2021.

³² Several villagers remain displaced to this day. At the core of the conflict lies an intricate land dispute fuelled by politics. Members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters reinforced fellow Moro Maguindanaons who were in conflict with the Teduray. This pattern of violence, pitting Moro armed groups against indigenous villagers, emerged in Datu Hoffer town in early 2018, and sporadically since then. Crisis Group online communication, indigenous villagers, 25 February and 2 March 2021.

III. The Decommissioning Process

A. Roadmap to Disarmament

The normalisation roadmap in the 2014 peace agreement contemplates the decommissioning of a total of 40,000 MILF guerrillas and 7,200 of their weapons before elections take place in 2022.³³ This disarmament process consists of a first, largely symbolic, phase followed by three major phases that are tied to particular benchmarks; each benchmark's completion marks the next phase's beginning.³⁴ The treaty also created an Independent Decommissioning Body tasked with organising and conducting the decommissioning process in close collaboration with the MILF and government. Its personnel come from Turkey, Norway, Brunei and Japan.

The peace agreement specifies that the final objective of decommissioning is to dissolve the MILF's military and "put [it] beyond use".³⁵ That military – the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces – includes everything from special forces to women's auxiliary brigades, medical services and religious personnel, split up among seven regional fronts and 32 base commands across Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.³⁶ The decommissioning body works off a list of combatants and weapons that the MILF is to submit prior to each phase.³⁷ Before actual disarmament, the body verifies that combatants are in fact ex-rebel fighters and that the weapons being handed over are on the MILF's official roster.³⁸

The latter task is particularly challenging. Under the agreement, the commitment to decommission 7,200 weapons refers only to guns recorded in the MILF's official register, including both high-powered weapons and lower-quality rifles from the Cold War era.³⁹ But many combatants bear arms that are not on the MILF's list, hav-

³³ This approach contrasts with that of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the first Moro rebels of the Moro National Liberation Front, which opted to integrate its fighters into the military and police. While 7,500 of its fighters joined government ranks, the rest never surrendered their weapons. Many remain armed today. Crisis Group Report, *The Philippines: Dismantling Rebel Groups*, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁴ In accordance with the peace treaty's Annex on Normalisation, the benchmarks are passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, starting the second overall phase (or the first major one); operationalisation of the Bangsamoro police force, starting the third overall phase (the second major one); and the Exit Agreement, to be signed after both parties declare all four phases complete and the 2014 treaty's terms fulfilled.

³⁵ The agreement's official language, partly inspired by the Good Friday accords in Northern Ireland, uses this phrase and not "surrender" or the more common formula of "disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration".

³⁶ Rebel women belong to the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigades and work in the medical, logistics and communication fields. Despite receiving military training, they have never participated in actual combat. At the political level, women are usually active in the MILF's Social and Welfare Committees.

³⁷ The original plan was for the MILF to submit a total list for all phases. Since then, the parties have agreed that the rebels will submit a list for each phase.

³⁸ Decommissioned weapons are not destroyed but are stored in a safekeeping area in Barira town, Maguindanao.

³⁹ The actual number of MILF-owned weapons is unknown, and estimates vary widely. See Office of Strategic and Special Studies, Armed Forces of the Philippines, *In Assertion of Sovereignty, Volume I: The 2000 Campaign against the MILF* (2008), p. 24; and *Volume II: The Peace Process* (2009), p. 4.

ing bought them personally or borrowed them from relatives, clan leaders or other influential figures. These guns are not included in decommissioning.⁴⁰

B. *Decommissioning Progress Report: From Aquino to Duterte*

The initial, largely symbolic phase of decommissioning occurred during Benigno Aquino's presidency in 2015, one year after the peace agreement was signed. A total of 145 combatants put forward their weapons. For some it was a transformative and emotional experience. One of them explained afterward:

During the decommissioning ceremony I was in tears. ... Until the night before, whenever I saw a soldier, I wanted to kill him. But that feeling changed that day. The decommissioning process was part of the commitment by the MILF. Regardless of how difficult it was, we followed the orders. And hopefully the government will also fulfil its own commitments as we progress.⁴¹

Upon taking office in 2016, the Duterte administration was keen on speeding up the peace process in order both to demonstrate its efficiency and to signal its commitment to the 2014 agreement. But the change of administration, the 2017 Marawi crisis and the challenges presented by the need to negotiate the Bangsamoro Organic Law slowed down the initial momentum.⁴²

After the Organic Law came into effect in August 2018 and the BARMM was created in March 2019, the authorities launched the first major push at decommissioning – the second phase overall – in September 2019. Some 12,000 MILF combatants laid down a total of 2,100 weapons and 3,480 rounds of ammunition, including 600 rounds for rocket-propelled grenades.⁴³ The combatants who took part represented all the MILF's fronts and units. Independent observers deemed it a success.⁴⁴ This phase lasted until March 2020, just a few weeks before the pandemic erupted.⁴⁵

One year later, the optimism occasioned by this success has waned and the process stalled. While the pandemic is largely responsible, part of the problem also lies in the fact that President Duterte nominated the top bureaucrat in charge of the peace process, Charlie Galvez, as head of the national COVID-19 response task force. Coming

⁴⁰ Illicit firearms are ubiquitous in Mindanao. A former government official estimated the total number to be around 100,000, including the MILF's weapons. Crisis Group interview, former government official, 23 November 2019.

⁴¹ Esrafil B. Sampayan, quoted in "The Journey of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's First Ex-Combatants", Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, December 2015.

⁴² Numerous discussions among local and national players preceded the passage of the Organic Law in July 2018 that paved the way for the BARMM's establishment.

⁴³ Bong Sarmiento, "12,000 MILF fighters deactivated", *Inquirer*, 25 March 2020; "Peace Conversations for the Bangsamoro", webinar, Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 25 September 2020.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group online interview, 25 February 2020. "Third Party Monitoring Team, Sixth Public Report, March 2019 to October 2020", p. 18.

⁴⁵ The roadmap had envisioned operationalisation of the police force would trigger the next phase – the third overall. As the Organic Law made no provision for a regional police force, the parties, strictly speaking, cannot follow the roadmap. They have, however, agreed to look past this problem: no one is citing failure to meet the police force benchmark as a reason not to proceed with decommissioning. The decommissioning body likewise declared the second overall phase complete.

on top of his existing responsibilities, the new job de facto limited Galvez's – and hence the government's – capacity to steer the peace process.⁴⁶

C. *Socio-economic Support*

Issues relating to the delivery of individual socio-economic support the government promised to provide ex-combatants as part of the normalisation process have become a major irritant in Manila-MILF relations.

Part of the problem is that the peace agreement is vague on the details of this type of support. It states only that the government “shall provide the necessary funding for the normalisation process”.⁴⁷ In 2014, the first batch of 145 combatants that was ceremonially decommissioned received only around \$400 per person and minor benefits. When Galvez became the government's peace adviser in December 2018, Manila committed, albeit informally, to provide a total of one million pesos (\$20,650) per decommissioned combatant, including livelihood support, housing and social protection (such as scholarship grants or civil registration) in the run-up to the second phase.⁴⁸

While the MILF now insists that Manila honour these terms, the government says its undertaking was not formal, and that it will need to complete a needs assessment to determine exactly what will go into the support package.⁴⁹ In the meantime, rebels received only about \$2,000 in transitional cash assistance on the day they were decommissioned. A disgruntled MILF member remarked that this amount buys a low-quality rifle.⁵⁰

Some resentment of perceived delays is starting to surface.⁵¹ A local MILF leader suggested that thus far it is manageable: “Our combatants are asking about the package. We are explaining the situation to them. The pandemic does not make things easy, and the government is also short of funds, so we can understand”.⁵² How long such understanding will last among the rank and file is, however, uncertain. “They say they are being tricked”, said a civil society leader of some MILF members from his area who disarmed in 2020.⁵³

⁴⁶ Crisis Group online interviews, sources close to the peace process, 16, 18 and 27 February 2021.

⁴⁷ See Annex on Normalisation, paragraph I. 1, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group online communication, diplomat, 6 March 2021. See also Froilan Gallardo, “Decommissioning of MILF combatants, weapons begins; Duterte to witness rites”, *Mindanews*, 7 September 2019. The government seems to have floated the million-peso package publicly in August 2019, but it had shared the idea informally as early as the preceding January. Crisis Group analyst's interviews and observations in a previous capacity, 27 February 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group online interview, government official, 5 March 2021. As of early March, the government indicated that it had profiled 70 per cent of decommissioned fighters, calling the process “re-engagement”. “Peace Conversations for the Bangsamoro”, webinar, Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 25 September 2020. Some critics highlight that Manila has had ample time since 2014 to prepare a thorough study of the needs of combatants and their families. Crisis Group online interview, former government official, 27 February 2021.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, MILF commander, 21 February 2021.

⁵¹ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader from Lanao, 25 February 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group online communication, 24 February 2021.

⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society leader from western Mindanao, 5 March 2021.

D. *Next Phases*

According to the 2014 peace deal, the next decommissioning phase (the third of four overall) is to cover 14,000 fighters. Despite unresolved issues relating to socio-economic benefits, the MILF submitted a list of combatants and weapons for this phase to the official decommissioning body in late December 2020.⁵⁴ While the government apparently has some questions about the list, and the schedule remains uncertain, the third phase seems to be moving slowly forward, with the decommissioning body conducting site visits and consultations as part of its preparations.⁵⁵

But momentum is halting at best. The pandemic has already impeded the preparations, and the rapid rise in COVID-19 cases in the Philippines since March threatens to delay things further. Given the hiccups so far, some commanders and fighters are apparently hesitant to proceed until their comrades from the second phase receive at least 50 per cent of the complete package that Galvez promised.⁵⁶ The debate about extending the interim government's term also complicates matters. The MILF leadership could well decide to postpone the process if an extension means it will have three more years before elections take place – especially given the uncertainty surrounding the support package for ex-combatants. “At the end, it will still be up to the MILF Central Committee”, said a senior commander.⁵⁷

One option for overcoming the present inertia would be to split the third phase of decommissioning in two parts: an initial verification of combatants, followed by the actual decommissioning.⁵⁸ Considering that the third phase is several months away at best, this step could give both sides a way of moving forward, even in the midst of pandemic restrictions. The government would also have more time to finalise the support package for combatants and clearly communicate its strategy for delivering it.

Whatever the government and MILF agree to with respect to the package, or fast-tracking part of it, they need to agree soon. For now, it is unlikely that MILF members would argue for returning to war, as the group's leaders are committed to the peace process and living comfortable lives as politicians. But delay could create problems. Perhaps the greatest concern is that MILF members irked by normalisation's pace could vent their frustration through violence. Alternatively, they may simply decline to participate. One commander has already told Crisis Group that, given questions about the timing, and more broadly, the transition, “there is no need to decommission”.⁵⁹ Progress could also be threatened by leadership vacuums in MILF strongholds, as several commanders died in 2020, perhaps sapping unit cohesion.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Crisis Group online interviews, 25 February and 5 March 2021.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group online interviews, 25 February and 5 March 2021. While the MILF submitted the list, some government officials raised questions about its content.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group online communication, source close to the decommissioning process, 11 February 2021.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 March 2021.

⁵⁸ By contrast, in the first and second phases, both steps occurred almost simultaneously: the decommissioning body profiled the assembled combatants for personal identification (ie, verified them) before officially disarming them on the same day.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group online communication, 20 February 2021.

⁶⁰ One prominent commander who died was Zacaria Goma, head of the 105th Base Command that covers several villages in Cotabato and Maguindanao, including Camp Omar. Development project implementers in various areas say the uncertainty over command succession is also a risk for devel-

Should mid- and lower-level commanders feel excluded from the MILF or come to doubt the BARM's benefits, some could leave the organisation, conceivably joining other militant groups.⁶¹ This scenario seems unlikely but cannot be ruled out, given the Moro rebellion's history of fragmentation.⁶²

E. *Avoiding a Security Vacuum*

The framers of the 2014 peace agreement took into account that the MILF's disarmament would leave in place many armed groups in a region awash with weapons, and that these groups might expand and jeopardise peace prospects for the Bangsamoro. As part of the 2014 peace agreement, the Philippine government and the MILF therefore set in motion measures to begin addressing this potential problem alongside the decommissioning process.

One such initiative is the creation of peacekeeping teams – called Joint Peace and Security Teams – comprising soldiers, police officers and MILF cadre members. These teams are charged with managing security in particularly sensitive Bangsamoro flashpoints.⁶³ Hundreds of men have undergone training and barracks are under construction. But implementation has been bumpy. While a few teams are already in place in some locations, political dynamics and security concerns have been an obstacle to smooth deployment in others.⁶⁴ Moreover, when the teams reach the field, they have struggled with operational questions. Although these teams have a mandate to maintain local stability stemming from the normalisation framework, they lack defined rules of engagement.⁶⁵ In the absence of a clear mandate that affords them the equivalent of law enforcement powers, the Joint Teams' practical usefulness remains

opment interventions as they now need to discuss projects with several interlocutors rather than one. Crisis Group online interviews, 16 February 2021.

⁶¹ Crisis Group online interview, former guerrilla, 18 February 2021.

⁶² Dissatisfaction with successive peace agreements in the southern Philippines led to several splits in the Bangsamoro rebellion, including the emergence of the MILF after the 1976 Tripoli agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF's predecessor group; the birth of Abu Sayyaf in the early 1990s; and the emergence of jihadist outfits such as the Maute Group following hiccups in the peace processes in 2008 and 2015.

⁶³ Outside the Joint Teams' areas, security is still in the hands of the national police and military.

⁶⁴ For example, a team was ceremonially deployed to Talitay, but the political conflict between Maguindanao's governor and the town's mayor eventually stalled a full deployment. Meanwhile, construction of a Joint Teams station in the village of Libutan, in Mamasapano town, Maguindanao, was interrupted after jihadist elements issued threats against it. The construction of the Joint Teams station in Kitango village, Datu Saudi town, also attracted the ire of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, who claimed to own the land on which the post was built. Guerrillas under the commander called Karianan attacked the military on 18 March, two days before the planned turnover. Crisis Group communication, local MILF sources, 20 March 2021. At the time of writing, only six Joint Teams were deployed. Crisis Group interview, government official, 5 March 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group online interview, 3 March 2021. The peace treaty's Annex on Normalisation tasks the Joint Teams with helping to maintain law and order by documenting private armies and other armed groups, supporting observance of the government-MILF ceasefire and supporting dispute resolution. The government and MILF are reviewing the operating manual to clarify if and when the Joint Teams have the right to use force. The consensus seems to be that force should be allowed only in cases of self-defence. A more proactive mandate for the Joint Teams to actively intervene in conflicts as a buffer force between warring factions remains unlikely for now.

to be seen.⁶⁶ For now at least, they may be best off focusing on coordination of national government and MILF responses to local conflicts.⁶⁷

A parallel security initiative concerns efforts to disband at least some of the most troublesome private armed groups in the region. From clan leaders to village chiefs to governors, heavyweights in the region use these militias in order to get the upper hand in disputes over land, political power and other matters. In some cases, the groups and the figures who control them are affiliated with ex-rebels, while in others they are traditional MILF adversaries. The militias pose a potential challenge for the peace process in that MILF members are understandably leery about disarming in situations where their local rivals are not.⁶⁸

A government task force created to tackle the issue of private armed groups has identified several militias to be dissolved across Mindanao.⁶⁹ It plans to encourage local leaders who command private armed groups to disband them all voluntarily, but as the 2022 elections draw closer, it may decide to proceed more forcefully.⁷⁰ Coordinating any such efforts with the MILF is critical since as noted some ex-rebels themselves lead militias that are on the government's list of private armed groups, and many of these private armies operate close to MILF-controlled areas.⁷¹

Finally, the peace agreement also foresaw two important measures linked to ensuring security across the weapons-infested region: the creation of a Bangsamoro police force, which could include ex-MILF fighters, and the departure of government military forces from the Bangsamoro. While these provisions officially remain part of the peace process roadmap, the former is no longer an option for the Duterte administration, as the Organic Law failed to provide for a regional police force after disagreements over whether such a move would be constitutional.⁷² The MILF, however, still considers the peace agreement's provision for such a force an important part of the original deal and may well bring up the issue in the future.⁷³ A possible compromise would be for the national police in the BARMM to speed up the waiver of entry requirements for former rebels seeking to join up.⁷⁴

As for demilitarisation, the Philippines army is very cautious about departing from the BARMM, given both the high levels of militancy in various provinces and the stalling of the decommissioning process. While the army's continued presence

⁶⁶ Crisis Group online interviews, international observer, 26 February 2021; government official, 5 March 2021.

⁶⁷ Such a role could fall under their mandate to "support dispute resolution initiatives on the ground". See Annex on Normalisation, op. cit. So far, the Joint Teams have contributed to building confidence between the parties, for example in Pikit town, a feuding hotspot in Cotabato province.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, MILF member, Cotabato province, 26 November 2020.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group online interview, government official, 5 March 2021.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. Crisis Group interviews, MILF officials, 23 February 2020. The list of "private armed groups" comes from government intelligence.

⁷² Audrey Morallo, "Palace: No separate Bangsamoro police, military", *Philippine Star*, 31 May 2018. Occasionally since then, Duterte has agreed with the idea of a Bangsamoro police, but he has taken no concrete steps in that direction. See Darryl John Esguerra, "Duterte inclined to allow BARMM to establish own armed forces", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 December 2019.

⁷³ Crisis Group online interview, source close to the MILF, 25 February 2021.

⁷⁴ As stipulated in Article XI, Section 2 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

could become a source of tension, the MILF has thus far not insisted that it vacate the new autonomous region.

IV. **Beyond Decommissioning: Camps, Combatants and Communities**

The decommissioning of MILF fighters is only part of a much wider normalisation process designed to bring about sustainable peace in the region.⁷⁵ The peace agreement rests on four complementary pillars, which are supposed to have equal priority: security arrangements (discussed in Section III), socio-economic development, confidence-building measures, and transitional justice and reconciliation.⁷⁶

For the MILF, these pillars represent not just a commitment to peace but also its ability to “give back” materially and politically to the group’s civilian base, and the Moro people more broadly, after decades of war.⁷⁷ Across the Bangsamoro, people have tremendous expectations of the economic benefits that peace will bring. For now, however, perceptions of what the peace agreement has delivered so far differ wildly.⁷⁸

The differences may in part reflect the great diversity of communities situated in the BARMM. While the MILF’s constituents constitute a sizeable part of the population in many villages and towns, clans or other armed groups command the fealty of many other residents. Even in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, where the MILF is strong, Moro loyalties are not uniform. The Teduray-Lambangian and other indigenous people living in the BARMM deserve particular attention. Together with the Bangsamoro’s Christian population, some of whom are descendants of migrants from elsewhere in the Philippines, they represent a minority whose rights the Organic Law officially protects.⁷⁹ But in many areas, violence from Moro groups against indigenous people continues, contradicting the promise of an inclusive Bangsamoro. The peace agreement’s overall success depends in part on how well it helps secure the well-being of these minority groups.⁸⁰

A. *Development Efforts and Camp Transformation*

Since 2014, most development aid to MILF areas has been channelled via the Mindanao Trust Fund for Reconstruction and Development. Funded by a pool of international donors, managed by the World Bank, and implemented jointly by the Bangsamoro Development Agency and local NGOs, the program has bankrolled dozens of projects. Because it has taken something of a piecemeal approach, focus-

⁷⁵ The 2014 treaty defines normalisation as a state whereby “communities can return to conditions where they can achieve their desired quality of life, which includes the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods and political participation within a peaceful deliberative society. The aim of normalisation is to ensure human security in the Bangsamoro”.

⁷⁶ Program for Normalisation in the Bangsamoro, Attachment to the Annex on Normalisation.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group online interview, long-term observer of the peace process, 27 February 2021.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group online interviews, community leaders and civilians, 13, 14 and 25 February 2021; 5 March 2021.

⁷⁹ Several parts of the indigenous population, including the Teduray-Lambangian, are Christian.

⁸⁰ Two interim government members representing the indigenous people filed a code on indigenous people as part of potential priority legislation in early 2020, but the bill is stuck. Concerns have now been elevated to the Intergovernmental Relations Body. Crisis Group telephone interview, interim government member, 22 February 2021.

ing on relatively small projects such as building warehouses and mills, and running livelihood workshops and community-based education drives, locals have not always perceived the outcomes as a large peace dividend.⁸¹ Some donors appear to understand the shortcomings. One donor official said: “They [the projects] were bits and pieces of little things”.⁸² Locals’ irritation at the slow pace of development adds to the frustration with the deadlock regarding individual support packages.⁸³

This aid is closely tied to the provisions of the 2014 peace agreement and its requirement that six major MILF camps be transformed into “peaceful and productive communities” via development projects.⁸⁴ The camps date back to before the peace deal. In the rebellion’s early days, MILF fighters took cover in Mindanao’s jungles and mountains, but later they moved to population centres and now live among their civilian support base.⁸⁵ Today, the MILF camps are not so much military compounds as they are villages where guerrillas, Moro civilians and other groups such as indigenous peoples live together. A local government official from Maguindanao with several MILF relatives explained: “It is a community-centred revolutionary group. They [the combatants] always talk to other residents when they pray in the mosque. Everyone here is a relative”.⁸⁶

The importance of camp transformation lies not only in the six areas’ political and social significance as “recognised camps”, prioritised by the peace agreement, but also in their links to decades of conflict. In the last twenty years, fighting between government and MILF forces affected all these camps, as well as nearby settlements, and some of the MILF’s strongest units still operate in or in vicinity of the six camps.⁸⁷ Prominent MILF commanders such as Abdullah Macapaar, aka Commander Bravo, and Jack Abbas command large forces in the Bilal and Rajamuda camps, respectively. Camp Abubakar, formerly the headquarters of MILF founder Salamat Hashim, carries an emotional value for many of the group’s leaders.⁸⁸

Over the last few months, both the government and the MILF seem to have made progress in speeding up development efforts, at least for the priority areas around the six MILF camps. In December 2020, the Bangsamoro Planning Development Authority completed a Camp Transformation Plan, which will serve as the blueprint

⁸¹ Crisis Group online interviews, development practitioners, 16 and 19 February 2021.

⁸² Crisis Group online interview, donor official, 19 February 2021. Many of these projects built socio-economic infrastructure such as solar dryers for grains or other foodstuffs, mills or warehouses.

⁸³ Crisis Group online interview, source close to the MILF, Cotabato province, 5 March 2021.

⁸⁴ Annex on Normalisation, Sections G, p. 8 and J, p. 9. The Philippine government officially recognised seven MILF camps in two agreements in February and October 1999: Abubakar as-Siddique, Badre, Bilal, Darapanan, Omar ibn al-Khattab, Rajamuda and Busrah Somiorang. Crisis Group Asia Report N°80, *Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process*, 13 July 2004, p. 6. All except Darapanan are to be transformed as part of normalisation.

⁸⁵ Some commanders and combatants work in military camps but live outside. Apart from the seven recognised camps, there are also smaller camps throughout the Bangsamoro and outside.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, local government official, Guindulungan, 25 November 2019.

⁸⁷ Camps Abubakar and Rajamuda were targets of all-out offensives by the Philippine government in the wars of 2000 and 2003. Regular tactical offensives by the military targeted the other camps.

⁸⁸ During the all-out war in 2000, the Philippine military took over the camp after a bloody campaign. Until then, Abubakar was the MILF’s main headquarters, the place where most of its current commanders got their training and education.

for camp-related development efforts.⁸⁹ The government and MILF are also in the process of conducting needs assessments in the six designated priority areas as well as other MILF communities; they began this work in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 peace agreement through the Joint Normalisation Committee, which they had formed, but left it unfinished. In February 2021, President Duterte also authorised the Memorandum of Understanding between the Philippine government and the World Bank that will activate the Bangsamoro Normalisation Trust Fund. The new instrument is meant to enable donors to participate in a structured approach to funding normalisation and to help the delayed camp transformation program catch up.⁹⁰

Among the major issues that remain to be ironed out with respect to camp transformation is the exact delineation of the camps, which has been a longstanding issue between the parties. A maximalist view, embraced by the MILF, views them as long stretches of land encompassing entire towns and even provinces. The government is sceptical of these claims and considers only a handful of villages to be actual camps.

But there may be a solution within reach. After long discussions, the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority now proposes to demarcate the camps with a three-tier formula: a “centre” or “core” at the heart, surrounded by or next to an “outer core” and encompassed by an “area of influence”.⁹¹ This definition accommodates both positions, and has the added advantage of recognising the complex social reality on the ground, where hundreds of thousands of civilians are “dependent on and interconnected with the camps”.⁹² Given the difficulty of finding a mutually acceptable formula for delineating MILF territories, this understanding, if accepted by all parties, would be welcome progress. The practical impact of tiering would likely be worked out once implementation starts and might concern prioritisation and timing of camp transformation projects.

B. *Beyond the Camps*

Although the government officially recognises only six MILF camps, there are, in reality, far more rebel outposts. Thousands of combatants thus live outside the six recognised areas, some of them even outside the BARMM.⁹³ The Joint Normalisation Committee is meant to coordinate economic support from donors, the government and NGOs to these areas.⁹⁴ Manila provides its own support through its existing socio-

⁸⁹ Crisis Group online interview, source close to the normalisation process, 16 February 2021.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group online interviews, 18 and 19 February 2021. It should be officially launched in April 2021.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, development officials, 16 and 26 February 2021.

⁹² Crisis Group online interview, donor official, 22 February 2021. MILF combatants have been very mobile in the past. Their movement – sometimes along with their families – means that they often live far from where their units are based. While each MILF base command has an officially assigned Area of Responsibility, its operational area also depends in practice on the residences of its commanders and their kinship ties. As a result, there are many villages where several MILF units are present; there are also MILF base commands covering more than just one province.

⁹³ Those camps are in Moro-dominated settlements across Mindanao, the majority of which were not subject to the referendum that determined the Bangsamoro’s core territory because they are remote from it.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group online interview, government official, 5 March 2021.

economic programs at the national level, and the BARMM is mandated through the Organic Law to offer its own assistance, meaning that both have a role to play in supporting rehabilitation, reconstruction and development.⁹⁵ Programs for rebel outposts beyond the camps, however, have so far failed to take off. A MILF commander at a base camp in western Mindanao confided: “We are still at the planning stage”.⁹⁶

Development planners should thus design their projects to encompass an area much broader than the six major MILF camps and the BARMM.⁹⁷ Including areas beyond the MILF camps in the BARMM in development projects may help contain tensions that could emerge from unequal distribution of gains.⁹⁸ “We cannot separate the place from the people”, said a development practitioner.⁹⁹ Communities and MILF base commands in the provinces of Sultan Kudarat, Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga del Norte should receive particular attention, given the levels of poverty and conflict there, as well as the presence of armed and criminal groups.¹⁰⁰

C. *Transitional Justice, Reconciliation and Amnesty*

After decades of conflict, the 2014 peace agreement provided for a transitional justice process that sought to investigate human rights violations, correct historical injustices and redress other grievances of the Bangsamoro people. The Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission that emerged held consultations with conflict-affected communities, leading to a series of recommendations.¹⁰¹ Two key proposals were to create a National Commission on Transitional Justice and to recognise disputes over land as a major driver of many past and present conflicts in the Bangsamoro. The Commission drafted its recommendations for both the national government and the autonomous region.

But the initial momentum ebbed and, despite Manila’s creation of a unit to carry out the Commission’s recommendations, most of them remain in limbo.¹⁰² In an effort to fill the vacuum, civil society organisations and academics have initiated an Independent Working Group on Transitional Justice and Dealing with the Past, which focuses on capacity building and skills training for members of interim government

⁹⁵ Article XIV, Section 1 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group online communication, MILF commander, 2 March 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, development practitioners, 19 and 26 February 2021.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group online interview, community workers, 18 February 2021.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group online interview, 27 February 2021.

¹⁰⁰ The MILF’s 113th Base Command operates in the Zamboanga region, while elements of the 104th, 105th, 106th and the National Guard are present in Sultan Kudarat.

¹⁰¹ Report of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission, 2016. See also “Land Report: Dealing with the Past and Land Dispossession in the Bangsamoro”, Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission, February 2017.

¹⁰² Lawmakers have tried to pass bills, but as most belong to the opposition, Duterte’s ruling party has been able to hold them up. A notable exception is the integration of Bangsamoro history into the national school curriculum, adopted in August 2016. A. Perez Rimando, “K-12 recalls Bangsamoro history”, *Manila Standard*, 3 August 2016.

ministries and the general public.¹⁰³ But absent a stronger commitment from the national government, some activists fear the civil society initiative may be raising expectations that Manila has no intention of meeting.¹⁰⁴ Some worry that Manila may end up “cherry-picking” the issues it plans to address, focusing for example on organising a bureaucracy to implement recommendations rather than actually carrying out recommendations directed at the state to, for instance, make apologies for past war crimes and offer reparations.¹⁰⁵

To facilitate reconciliation, the 2014 agreement also foresaw amnesty and pardons for MILF members who are either behind bars or facing arrest warrants that predate the peace process.¹⁰⁶ But while in recent years Manila has initiated confidence-building measures in particularly prominent cases, for example by issuing safe conduct passes to high-level commanders (eg, when they were travelling between recognised camps or to Cotabato, the BARMM’s seat), it did not clearly communicate its position on the question of amnesties.¹⁰⁷

That changed somewhat on 16 February 2021, when President Duterte declared a general amnesty for members of armed groups who have committed crimes “because of their political belief” – a definition that logically includes the MILF.¹⁰⁸ Still, since MILF affiliation often overlaps with clan or other allegiances, it may be difficult to determine who will benefit from the amnesty. In the end, it seems likely that the government will issue amnesties or pardon MILF fighters for crimes related to the conflict but not for any perpetrated in a personal capacity.

Notwithstanding the fits and starts of the government’s efforts in this area, the MILF’s reactions have been positive so far. The president’s February proclamation appears to have generated good-will within the group after such a long period of inertia. The MILF says some 1,000 members could be eligible for the recently announced amnesty.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ This group is composed of civil society members and academics who supported the prior work of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission. It is funded by the Spanish development agency, AECID.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group online interview, international observer, 10 February 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Manila, 7 December 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Annex on Normalisation, Section J, paragraph 2. Police and military officers arrested some MILF members on criminal charges because of their alleged involvement in the drug trade, extortion or violence related to land disputes. In some cases, they were released, while in others they still await trial.

¹⁰⁷ In November 2019, the MILF submitted a list of its members in custody along with details of the criminal cases in which they are implicated. The government responded that they could apply individually for pardon and bail with possible government assistance.

¹⁰⁸ Krissy Aguilar, “Duterte grants amnesty to members of rebel groups”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 16 February 2021. An Amnesty Commission is now in the works to process applications from members of armed groups. Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader, 25 February 2021.

¹⁰⁹ “BARMM official says around 1,000 MILF members to be granted amnesty”, ABS-CBN, 19 February 2021.

V. Building Momentum amid Uncertainty

While the political transition has taken centre stage in the Bangsamoro peace process over the last two years, the normalisation agenda is just as crucial to its success. Knocked off course by COVID-19, normalisation cannot be allowed to stagnate. With the first two phases of the decommissioning process complete, both Manila and the MILF need to regain the momentum that the pandemic sapped by turning their energy and attention to phase three of decommissioning and other vital elements of the peace agreement. Donors can help by boosting their support for the socio-economic aspects of normalisation at this crucial juncture.

A. *Boosting the Delivery of Socio-economic and Development Benefits*

For the Duterte administration, a key task is to deliver the socio-economic benefits to ex-rebels that it promised, consistent with the 2014 agreement, and that are key to motivating the MILF to disarm. Whatever additional work the government needs to complete with respect to a needs assessment, or seeking different agencies' input to fine-tune the specific elements of the compensation package, it should finish without delay. If releasing the entire package is not feasible in the near term, Manila should offer ex-rebels at least some benefits – such as an ad hoc allowance, for example, or non-cash assistance in the form of scholarships or livelihood support – so as to soothe the frustration that threatens to grow in the MILF's ranks and sow disaffection with the peace process.¹¹⁰

Similarly, Manila should work closely with international partners and the MILF to kick off the Normalisation Trust Fund in order to speed up the camp transformation agenda and use the Joint Normalisation Committee to coordinate other socio-economic interventions in and outside the BARM.

Donors, for their part, have a vital role to play at this fragile juncture. They should scale up initiatives that could bring a peace dividend through bigger and more tangible development projects for the Bangsamoro, particularly in the form of infrastructure such as roads, electricity or water systems in the six camp areas.¹¹¹

Coordination – within the government, among the MILF and international partners, and among donors themselves – on the use of the trust fund and development interventions more broadly is vital to ensure that programming avoids duplication. Cooperation is particularly important when it comes to the ambitious camp transformation program, given that the targeted areas are more prone to conflict. As noted, interventions should take into account local dynamics in various areas to avoid harm that could arise from uninformed project implementation. Conflict and needs assessments, community participation and local partners are vital ingredients for success.

Donors should treat all six camps on equal footing, while not neglecting poor and conflict-affected areas in central and western Mindanao, and bearing the following points in mind:

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, peace process officials, 15 December 2019 and 25 February 2021.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group online interviews, donor officials, 19 and 20 February 2021.

- ❑ Socio-economic interventions may occur in actual conflict areas and thus need to be planned carefully with respect to security. Exchanges of gunfire over land are not uncommon, even if they do not always escalate into larger skirmishes.¹¹² Militant groups are operating in the vicinities of the Bilal, Busrah and Omar camps and are also a potential threat to development projects, since they could either endanger implementation or win more recruits if the projects are derailed.¹¹³
- ❑ Donor initiatives should take into account the potential impact of aid on the social cohesion of Moro communities. Infighting among commanders, as has recently occurred in some camps, can happen.¹¹⁴
- ❑ Focusing on local rebel leaders as main intermediaries for development projects may appear practical, but needs assessments should also include other voices from the ground to ensure community participation and buy-in. Camps and communities that are particularly fragmented along kinship and political lines, such as Omar and Rajamuda, also require detailed conflict analysis by donors and their implementing partners before proceeding with development interventions.
- ❑ Favouring some camps over others might result in frustrations among those left behind. To avoid ill-feeling, donors could work with local partners knowledgeable about the areas and focus, in partnership with the government and MILF, on financing initiatives that support public goods such as health, water and education projects, and carry less risk of becoming personal spoils.
- ❑ Indigenous populations such as the Teduray-Lambangian consider Omar and Badre camps part of their ancestral domain.¹¹⁵ Apparently emboldened by the peace agreement, some MILF members have violently asserted themselves in indigenous areas with land claims, often resulting in displacement of the Teduray-Lambangian.¹¹⁶ Although development initiatives have begun consulting such indigenous communities more regularly, the overall focus on MILF communities means that much remains to be done in ensuring they are not forgotten. Interventions should ensure the indigenous groups' participation in development planning, while the MILF-led transitional authority should do more about resolving these land issues.

¹¹² Crisis Group communication, community leader from Abubakar area, 25 February 2021. Rajamuda experienced regular flare-ups of feuds in the past three years. Local politics in Pagalungan and Pikit, the Cotabato towns bordering the camp, have been traditional irritants to stability.

¹¹³ Camp Busrah, in the Butig municipality, was next door to the Maute Group's original base, which later made its assault on Marawi and now operates not far from Busrah and Bilal. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters regularly cross the areas under Camp Omar's influence.

¹¹⁴ Bravo's camp in Bilal saw such infighting, stirred up partly by competition over benefits, but also by a personal grudge between him and a subordinate commander. Crisis Group online interviews, 20 and 27 February 2021.

¹¹⁵ Ancestral domain refers to large portions of land claimed by the Philippines' indigenous peoples. The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 was never implemented in Muslim Mindanao, and one of the interim government's first resolutions in September 2019 was to ask the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples to stop the delineation of ancestral domains in Maguindanao.

¹¹⁶ "In a way, normalisation contributed to conflict", said a local indigenous leader. Crisis Group online interview, 22 February 2021. Violence affecting the indigenous people existed long before the BARMM's establishment in 2019.

B. *Keeping Decommissioning on Track*

The MILF should do all it can to encourage positive momentum on the normalisation track, pushing its members to move forward with decommissioning, and working to keep as close to the previous roadmap as possible regardless of whether the transition is extended or not. The group cannot be expected to move forward indefinitely without seeing more evidence of the promised peace dividend. But at least some further progress should be possible if Manila moves quickly to produce some additional benefits. Should concerns arise – for example due to the delay of the process or in relation to the decommissioning list for the third phase – the ex-rebels should raise them to the Independent Decommissioning Body.

To encourage internal cohesion, the MILF should also disseminate information to combatants and communities on normalisation. Doing so would help avoid misperceptions about decommissioning that could lead some MILF members to grab land, buy new weapons with the cash received or assert themselves violently over minority groups.¹¹⁷ The MILF should also discipline its commanders involved in feuds and strive to improve relations with indigenous communities.

C. *Improving Stability and Preventing Conflict*

Both the national government and MILF need to do more to improve stability in pockets where violence – such as communal conflicts and feuds – persists, especially as clashes could easily draw in MILF combatants who retain their weapons.¹¹⁸ The Joint Peace and Security Teams could help. They will be deploying to well-chosen sites where their presence can have a strong impact, and where the sight of impartial government and MILF forces working hand in hand could boost the public's confidence in law and order in the new autonomous region. The two sides should now speed up the deployment of these hybrid units and agree on their exact mandate and operating procedures.

The national government should also hasten the disbandment of private armies through the government task force established for this purpose, as these militias remain a considerable challenge to achieving local peace, more so in the run-up to the 2022 elections. It is, however, crucial that Manila coordinate such efforts with the MILF-led regional authorities to avoid incidents that could draw in MILF forces.¹¹⁹

For its part, the interim regional government will need to step up its efforts at conflict prevention. Local government units and the MILF have managed to settle some disputes through their own channels, but the successes are often temporary and disconnected from regional institutions that should ideally regulate and supervise these efforts.¹²⁰ Rather than relying on improvised bodies to manage tensions on an ad hoc basis or reacting to bouts of violence by providing relief to displaced peo-

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group online interview, 18 February 2021.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group online interview, interim government official, 1 March 2021.

¹¹⁹ For more details on tackling the private militias without spurring conflict, see Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leader, 25 February 2021.

ple, the interim government should use existing local conflict resolution mechanisms such as Peace and Order Councils at the village and municipal levels.¹²¹

Within the regional government, the ministry of public order and safety, in particular, should work toward institutionalising such mechanisms of local governments, in tandem with local dispute resolution bodies at the municipal level. It should develop more links with MILF commanders, support the Joint Teams by offering dispute resolution training, and develop clear plans with benchmarks to stabilise hotspots.¹²²

Looking beyond the MILF to others involved in or affected by conflict in the region will also be important. The high incidence of land conflict across the Bangsamoro requires particular attention.¹²³ Manila should fulfil core recommendations of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission related to protecting the indigenous ancestral domain by properly surveying disputed land and setting up a land ownership database in the Bangsamoro. Strong regional ministries should also play a key role in advancing dispute resolution. As noted, the interim government should also give particular attention to land conflicts in or around the six recognised camps and ensure that the rights of indigenous communities are respected.¹²⁴ Passage of the pending code for indigenous people by the BARMM would be a welcome step in that direction.

¹²¹ Crisis Group online interview, humanitarian expert, 9 February 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 26.

¹²² For more details, see Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

¹²³ The ministry of environment and natural resources and the ministry of human settlements and development in the BARMM have important roles to play. On ways forward for conflict resolution, see Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit.

¹²⁴ Both in anticipation of development work in the camps and as a fulfilment of Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission recommendations.

VI. Conclusion

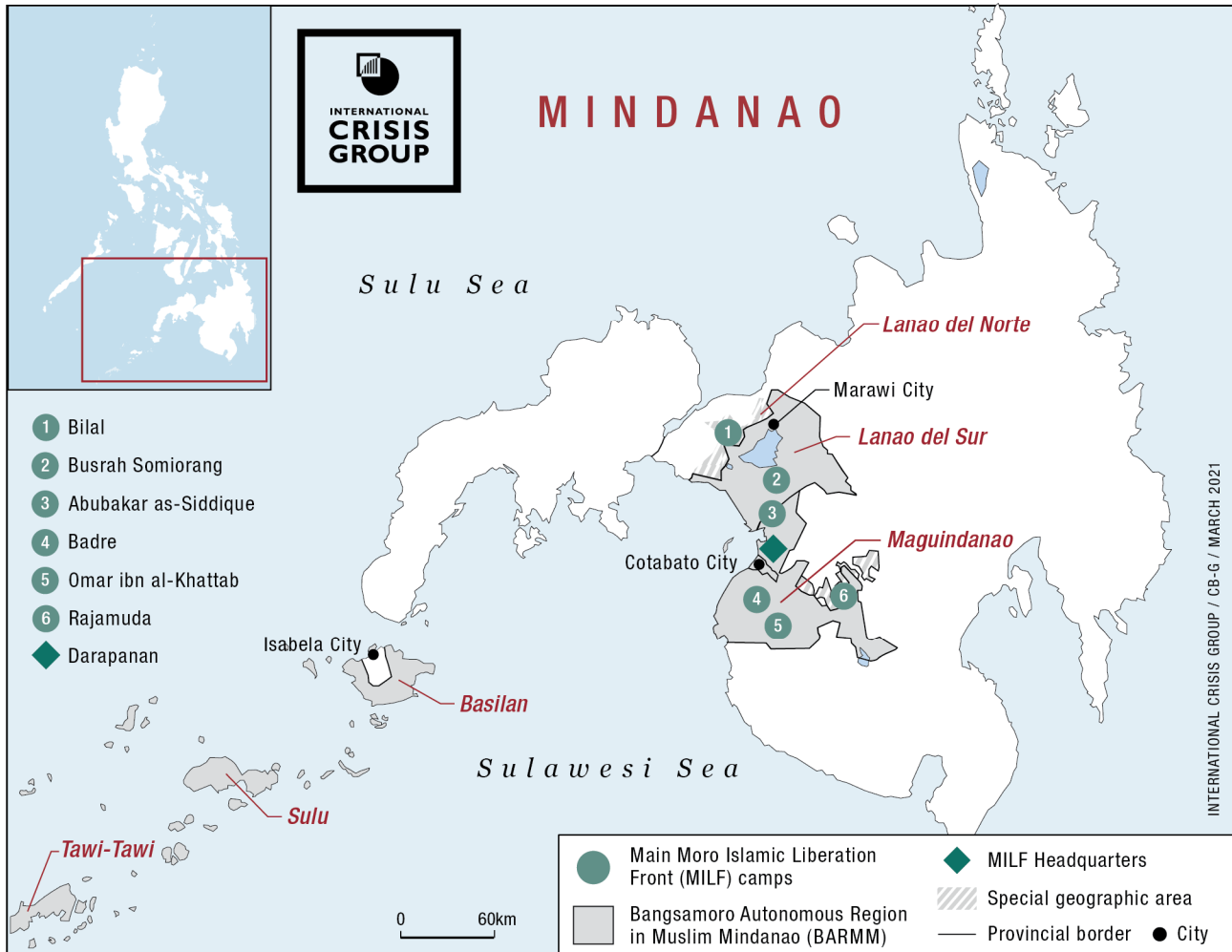
The 2014 peace agreement in the Bangsamoro envisioned a holistic approach that would turn the page on decades of war once a new autonomous region was created. Two years in, the political transition has made impressive progress, but decommissioning and other facets of normalisation lag behind, with potentially grave consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unwelcome distraction, which may now translate into an extension of the transition period. Whether that happens or not, the roadmap should remain intact. Manila needs to keep its promises to extend an economic package to decommissioned combatants as demonstration of its commitment to the peace process. The MILF needs to remain committed to decommissioning – and resist the temptation to postpone the process even if the transition period is extended. Through their role in the interim regional administration, the ex-rebels should also focus on curbing local conflict and ensuring that religious and ethnic minorities benefit from a peaceful Bangsamoro along with the Moro majority.

In parallel, the national and regional governments need to urgently agree on their priorities in the development sphere. Donors have an important role to play. But the primary responsibility for a peaceful transition in the Bangsamoro – one that improves the lives of all its people – lies with Manila and the former insurgents now running the region. Both parties should remember the flexibility that made the peace agreement possible and work in that spirit of cooperation to keep the Bangsamoro free of armed conflict.

Manila/Brussels, 15 April 2021

Appendix A: Map of Main Moro Islamic Liberation Front Camps



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

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