

BANTAY CEASEFIRE

FIELD MONITORING

**Camp Cararao and Buliok Islamic Center
November 6 & December 9-10, 2003**

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Background

This field report relates to civil society efforts to bring back the Philippine government (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to the negotiating table. Among the obstacles to the resumption of formal peace talks this year is the reported links of the MILF to the terror group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), as alleged by the government. Another contentious issue is on the pull-out of government troops from Buliok, which the MILF cites as a “precondition” to the resumption of the talks.

During the Consultation-Dialogue between NGOs, civil society, peace advocates and the MILF last December 8, 2003 at Simuay, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, the Bantay Ceasefire, an independent civil-society-led monitoring team, requested the MILF Central Committee to allow an independent team to inspect one of their camps in Lanao del Sur. Camp Cararao was alleged by Defense Secretary Eduardo Ermita and top AFP officials to be the site where 31 Indonesian members of the international terror group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) were reportedly holding bomb making trainings.

The MILF agreed and even sent its CCCH (Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities) headed by its chair Benjie Midtimbang to join the inspection. A news team from the ABS-CBN also joined.

A second team of Bantay Ceasefire monitors also went on a field mission to assess the status of the Islamic Center in Brgy. Buliok, Pagalungan, Maguindanao, which was the target of the AFP assault in February 2003.

The Way to “Camp Cararao”

The Ghost Town of Butig

The mission team passed by Butig, Lanao del Sur on the way to Cararao at around 1 o'clock in the morning. Under the pale light of the moon, the poblacion area of Butig looked like a ghost town to the team. The buildings the team passed were deserted and already choked by vines and surrounded by tall grass. On the way back to Marawi, the team passed by the town again but this time in broad daylight and confirmed its observations. The municipal government compound was empty of people, with the two-storey buildings still showing the marks of machine gun bullets. The government officials had also fled and there was no one administering government services in the vicinity. According to a resident, the Butig poblacion was abandoned for two reasons - because of a continuing rido (clan war) among the Maranao in Butig; and also because of the “all-out war” in the year 2000 and the resulting military occupation of the town.

The “Camp”

“Cararao” is a Maranaw term for “kettle”. The name of the camp was apparently derived from two small springs which were the only source of water in the area. Locals likened the spring flow volume to that of water poured out of a water kettle. The flow volume was so miniscule that the MILF fighters were forced to hold water in a piece of rain curtain, although we estimated the improvised “storage” to hold less than two water drums.

Mt. Makaturing where “Camp Cararaw” is located is about 5 hours walk from Barangay Sandab Madaya Butig Lanao del Sur. The team was met by a group of MILF fighters in an area which they said is the boundary of Lanao Sur and Maguindanao province. The team also passed an MILF checkpoint/guard post where we are all asked to leave our cameras, tape recorders and cell phones, even the MILF-CCCH and our armed escorts.



Camp Cararao has no noticeable fence or boundary. The main clearing is approximately 5,000 square meters, where five temporary structures

covered with plastic “rain curtains”. There is a receiving or reception tent about 10x10 square feet, and a kitchen and mess hall. Near the kitchen is the living quarters. Another structure is the prayer house, the largest structure measuring about 12 feet by 24 feet.

Members of Bantay Ceasefire and the media talking with the “camp” commander

There was a platoon-sized group of armed mujahideens led by the camp commander Hadji Jamal Sultan. They were summoned to a formation for us to interview. There was no attempt to hide identities and Mr. Benjie Midtimbang, chair of the MILF – CCCH who was with the visiting team, even instructed the MILF members to show their faces clearly to the visitors.

Observations and Analysis

1. Camp Cararao is not a military camp in the strictest sense. Aside from the guard post and sentries, we did not see any large military formation or military structures that indicate a permanent occupancy. All the structures were small and temporary and could easily be dismantled in case of attack.
2. The camp commander said Cararao was established almost the same time as Camp Abubakar, serving as the exit of Camp Abubakar and the rear guard going to Lanao Sur. After Camp Abubakar was attacked and captured, the MILF fighters transferred to Cararao because it was a “safe” place, being too far away for an artillery strike.
3. There were no visible training structures seen by the mission team. The main area was a clearing only suitable for formations or marching practice. This clearing can be easily camouflaged by foliage to render it indistinct from above.
4. The team did not see any foreigners or any foreign-looking person in the area. All the men in uniform that we interacted with are Maranaw speaking.

5. Because of the scarcity of water in the area, the area does not seem suited to host a large number of people especially for militarily training. It is more of a hiding place, as Mr. Midtimbang said.

Brgy. Buliok and the Islamic Center

Last November 6, an unscheduled visit to Brgy. Buliok was made by NGOs as part of the exploratory visit of Mr. David Grant of the Nonviolent Peaceforce International. The visitors saw up to a hundred unoccupied core shelter houses that were newly-built by government and turned over to evacuees. The new residents had fled their houses in panic reaction to what they saw as the “advance” or movement of the Marines from their position inside the Islamic Center compound towards the Liguasan Marsh.

Secretaries Dinky Soliman and Ging Deles of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process respectively were apprised of the situation but both reportedly denied the abandonment of the core houses.

The issue of the troop “repositioning” again surfaced during the December 8 consultation-Dialogue with MILF Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jaafar in Maguindanao, who restated the MILF’s call for the return of military’s position to pre-Feb. 8, 2003.

The following day, a group of nineteen “Bantay Ceasefire” members and NGOs went to Brgy. Buliok in Pagalungan town to assess the reported troop repositioning and status of the Buliok Islamic Center. They interviewed Col. Ben Dolorfino, 2nd Marine Brigade commander in Fort Pikit. The team took a boat ride to Brgy. Bago Inged and from there walked towards the Marine encampment, which was about 600 meters away from the Islamic Center and beside the water canal connected to the Liguasan marsh. They interviewed there Marine Lieutenant Bernard Clavecillas, also of the 2nd Marine Brigade. The ceasefire team later inspected the Islamic center compound which was just a short walk from the Marine position.

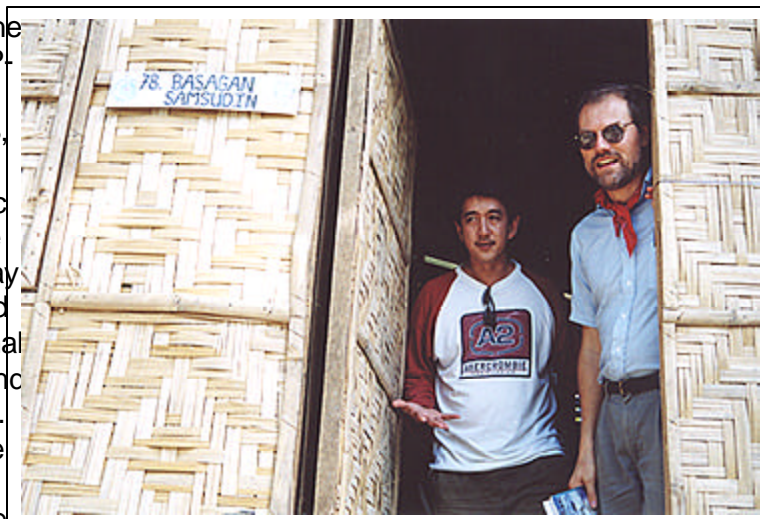
Interviews with the two Marine officers revealed the following:

- Most of the core shelter houses at the Buliok Islamic Center are currently unoccupied. Reasons cited were: fear of an armed confrontation; lack of food and livelihood and a difficult life. Other families moved to other towns where there are crop harvests. Still other families with schoolchildren moved to the poblacion in Pikit, Pagalungan and Pagagawan because schools in Buliok have not yet reopened.
- The Marines moved some 600 meters towards the water canal connected to the Liguasan Marsh in early November. Their presence is primarily to protect the government projects currently ongoing. Another 100 core shelter houses were being built on the riverbanks of Buliok 2, Pagalungan.
- There were two troop movements last November, purportedly in response to the massing of MILF forces believed to be aimed at retaking the Islamic Center. The Buliok civilian community was alarmed by the movements but the Marines said they were careful to maintain a 300-meter distance from any civilian community

- The Marine commander says they are amenable to abandoning the current canal position (a “strategic offensive” position because their presence can deter movement of hostile forces between the marsh and the Pulangui river) and reposition to an alternative site, as a “confidence building” gesture and to de-escalate the tension.

Findings

1. Presumably in adherence to the conditions set forth in the GRP-MILF exploratory talks in Kuala Lumpur in October 2003, the Marine troops in Buliok have pulled out from the Islamic Center. They are approximately 600 meters away from the Islamic Center and positioned along the water canal which serves as entrance and exit to the Liguasan Marsh. But while the Marines have pulled out from the Islamic Center, they are still in effective



- control of the area and in fact the abandoned core shelters local caretakers are required to secure Marine permission before they can leave the premises.
2. “Bantay Ceasefire” notes that the movement of the Marines in Buliok puts them in an eyeball-to-eyeball situation with the MILF positions in the Liguasan Marsh. The newly-returned evacuees find the armed troops on both sides too close for comfort. The proximity between the Marines and the MILF can result in a firefight from the slightest provocation or accident.
3. The Suara Kalelentad, the organization of evacuees from Pagalungan and Pagagawan, maintain that the Marine movement closer to the Liguasan Marsh put civilians more at risk because there are MILF positions in the marsh.
4. The Marines in Buliok agree that there are “alternative sites” they can move to, but only higher command can order them to move. As far as the Marines are concerned, they are there to protect the civilians and the government projects being constructed therein such as the bridge that would connect Pagalungan and Pikit,
5. Bantay Ceasefire estimates that less than fifty percent of the 100 core shelters in Buliok were occupied at the time the actual inspection was conducted on December 9.

Recommendations

1. For the Joint GRP-MILF CCCH to immediately discuss and agree on another “repositioning” of the Marine troops now positioned along the water canal in Brgy. Buliok, to prevent firefights, de-escalate the tension and enable civilians to return to the core shelter houses.
2. For the Adhoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) formed between the GRP and the MILF to be immediately dispatched to Brgy. Buliok to assess and decide on the potentially explosive situation and to ensure proper coordination of the ceasefire implementation.
3. In the event that the AHJAG is not yet dispatched and in place in Brgy. Buliok, for the Marines and military officers assigned along the Liguasan Marsh and the MILF field commanders to open formal or informal channels of communication to ensure proper coordination of the ceasefire implementation.
4. For Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs) to be immediately activated in Pikit, Pagagawan and Pagalungan and in the provincial LMT level in North Cotabato and Maguindanao. These municipal and provincial LMTS should coordinate with the Adhoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) of the GRP and the MILF.

Participants

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