



The World Buddha Sasan Sebak Sangha forms a human chain at Shahbagh in the city yesterday protesting the burning of Buddhist flag at Bandarban.

Philippines peace process fails to ring changes

REUTERS, Manila

Manila's church bells pealed yesterday to usher in "national peace consciousness month" - an event that rings hollow for conflict-stricken communities in the southern Philippines.

Ten years ago this week, the government of the largely Roman Catholic country signed a deal with a group of Muslim insurgents called the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that was meant to end decades of conflict. Instead, it sowed more strife.

Manila had raised hopes a peace deal could be signed this month with another Muslim rebel group. But talks have stalled over demands by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for more territory in an enlarged Muslim homeland.

Negotiations, brokered by Malaysia, are due to resume next week but neither side has shown much urgency for a breakthrough.

In fact, both President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and MILF Chairman Ebrahim Murad have good reasons for simply maintaining the status quo with its fragile ceasefire and round after round of exploratory talks.

Forging a peace deal for the impoverished south is likely to provoke rival Muslim groups and local Christian communities with competing claims on land and governance, as well as upset military commanders whose jobs are intertwined with conflict.

DELAYS BREED RISKS

Arroyo, who has survived two impeachment attempts and many alleged plots, cannot afford to upset powerful players such as the army, whose members have been part of at least a dozen coup attempts - two of them successful - in the last 20 years.

There is also little pressure from the public or media to resolve a conflict that seems remote to many Filipinos, most of whom have not been to the southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu.

But the fighting, which has killed more than 120,000 people and displaced at least 1 million since the early 1970s, risks flaring up again if Manila and Muslim leaders do not come up with a deal that addresses the frustrations of a new generation.

"The longer this goes on without a resolution, the greater the potential for the younger, more militant people and the MILF members opposed to the talks to gain in strength," said Malcolm Cook, programme director for Asia and the Pacific at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

A failure to hammer out agreement also plays into the hands of Abu Sayyaf, the smallest and most militant Islamic separatist group in the Philippines, which relies on the acquiescence of locals to maintain its bases on remote southwestern islands.

"I don't think all the dangerous guys with guns will go away," said Tom Green, executive director of risk consultancy Pacific Strategies & Assessments.

"But it's in everybody's interest to try and get the MILF and government to move forward," he said. "We feel that would dry up a lot of the water that the Abu Sayyaf swims in."

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

No one wants to repeat the mistakes of the 1996 agreement between the government of then President Fidel Ramos and the MNLF, which partly failed due to weak implementation.

Accustomed to guerrilla warfare in the jungle, MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari and his lieutenants were not prepared for office life as administrators.

Angered by the government failing to deliver all the funds it had promised after accusing him of mismanagement, Misuari led a botched rebellion in 2001 and is now under house arrest.

The former university professor, still an influential figure in the south, has been given 18 hours leave to attend a ceremony commemorating the signing of the 1996 peace deal this weekend in the port city of Davao.

To prevent a repeat of the failures of the MNLF deal, the government and the MILF have been running workshops, sponsored by the World Bank, to teach guerrillas about management tactics and balancing the books.

But even with better implementation this time round, an agreement could still tip the southern Philippines back into a cycle of violence because

the talks have not yet addressed how to merge an MILF accord with what was promised to the MNLF.

The 1996 deal with the MNLF was a boon to the MILF, which opposed it as insufficient and saw its numbers rise as a result.

Now, their own deal, if it is ever signed, could result in a similar boost for the MNLF or Abu Sayyaf or a splinter group.

Efforts to seek accord have also skirted around ownership of the south's abundant seams of copper, gold and nickel, which remain largely untapped due to the insurgency.

Resolving a conflict that stretches back more than 400 years and involves the competing interests of fractious Muslim clans, Christian communities and at least 18 indigenous tribes requires vision and commitment.

But Arroyo, who rang a peace bell in Manila on Friday, is focused on other pressing issues such as the economy, a communist insurgency and allies facing congressional elections next year.

"I think the government is fairly satisfied with the status quo right now," said Green. "It (the south) is not hot enough to force their attention."

Heat, drought take rising toll on SW China

REUTERS, Beijing

The worst drought to hit southwest China in more than a century is spreading to neighbouring provinces with temperatures reaching record highs, state media said yesterday.

The densely populated municipality of Chongqing and eastern parts of Sichuan province have been plagued by repeated heat-waves and have seen no significant

rainfall since early July.

The drought is the worst since 1891 when meteorological records began in Chongqing, now hosting a population of 30 million, and had brought direct economic losses totalling 6.5 billion yuan (\$817 million), Xinhua said.

Heat and drought had also hit the neighbouring province of Guizhou, the eastern provinces of Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi, and the central provinces of Hunan and Hubei,

Xinhua said.

Temperatures of up to 42.4 degrees Celsius (108.3 degrees Fahrenheit) were recorded in Chongqing on Thursday, after a high of 43.4 C on Wednesday.

Chongqing city, the industrial heart of the municipality with a population of 12 million, reported a record high of 44.5 C on Aug. 16.

Some 18 million people have been short of drinking water and 11 million hectares of crops, mostly rice but including corn and tobacco, have been destroyed or damaged, Xinhua news agency said.

"The drought is a rarity in history in terms of the time it has lasted, its extent and the huge damage it has caused," Xinhua quoted the top drought relief official, Er Jingping, as saying.

No deaths have been reported.

More than 4,000 people have been fighting a forest blaze that had ravaged parched timber since Wednesday in the north of Chongqing, which reported 97

forest fires in August, Xinhua said.

The impact has been broad. Crop production is down and vegetable prices are soaring.

But millions of schoolchildren and teachers have seen the start of term postponed due to the latest heatwave which is expected to last at least until Monday.

Authorities had successfully prevented farmers clashing over water, either for drinking or irrigation, Xinhua said.

Some coal traders, trying to profit from the disaster, have sold coal adulterated with anything from pebbles to limestone to power plants as prices rise.

"Generators were seriously damaged and kept having to halt operation, worsening the already strained electricity supply," Xinhua quoted a local official as saying.

na's east and southeast have already been repeatedly battered by typhoons and floods this summer, killing more than 1,000 people.

