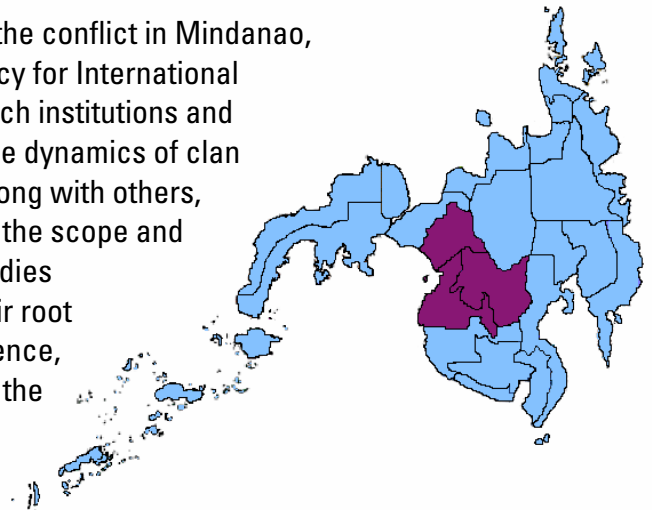


Executive Summary

Big Wars, Small Wars: the Interplay of Large-scale and Community Armed Conflicts in Central Mindanao

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In an effort to create a clearer understanding of the conflict in Mindanao, The Asia Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development supported Mindanao-based research institutions and non-government organizations in investigating the dynamics of clan violence, otherwise known as *rido*. This study, along with others, provides a comprehensive conflict map showing the scope and magnitude of clan conflicts in Mindanao. The studies highlight specific cases of conflict, exploring their root causes and conditions for escalation and recurrence, their interaction with state-related conflicts, and the potential for conflict resolution.



STUDY OVERVIEW

“Large-scale war has its effects on persistent and pre-existing local conflicts,” observes a 2003 World Bank social assessment on conflict affected areas in Mindanao. “One consequence of this is that parties to localized conflict often had occasion to bring military resources of secessionist movements and of the government to descend upon their enemies,” concludes the World Bank report.

This study noted that the World Bank observation also manifests in certain situations in Central Mindanao. Local conflicts trigger large-scale armed confrontations between government and rebel forces. In these events, parties to localized conflicts are able to exploit the military resources of both forces. In certain cases, parties to localized armed conflicts are themselves part of the military resources of both government and rebel forces. Localized armed conflicts have an impact on large-scale armed conflicts precisely because of the ability of parties in local conflicts to bring the military resources of both state and rebels in confronting their perceived enemies. In other occasions, local armed groups are tapped by government and rebel forces in large-scale armed engagements.

The case study areas considered here include:

1. Linantangan, Mamasapano, Maguindanao
2. Dapiawan, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao
3. Gli-gli, Pikit, North Cotabato
4. Buliok, Pagalungan, Maguindanao
5. Lebpas, President Roxas, North Cotabato

FINDINGS

Actors in Conflict

The major actors of the armed conflicts in Central Mindanao are the forces of the state composed of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP); and the armed opposition forces under the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). On the ground, these forces are augmented by an array of community-based armed groups effectively establishing local dimensions of the forces of the state and armed oppositions, as well as a community character of the large-scale armed conflicts.

State forces have been assisted by paramilitary formations like the Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU), Special CAFGU Active Auxiliary (SCAA) and the Civilian Volunteers Organization (CVO). On the other hand, the MILF maintains area base commands which include armed local militias.

The interplay of all these armed groups produces an explosive situation and plays a sensitive role in the recurring character of violence in the conflict-prone areas of Central Mindanao.

The five case studies illustrate the similarities and differences in the patterns of the interplay of community and large-scale armed conflicts.

Armed conflict events in Linantangan, Dapiawan and Gli-gli marked the significant roles played by paramilitary forces supported by government troops and of local militias aligned to the MILF in the outbreak and escalation of violence.

The core of the Linantangan violence in August 2004 actually involved an uncle and nephews feuding over a piece of inherited land. The feuding relatives, however, were also separately aligned with conflicting armed groups operating in and around the village. The uncle, as the barangay chair of Linantangan, is linked with local government officials who controlled the SCAA and CVO. The SCAA and the CVO are structures connected to the Army unit deployed in the area. The barangay chairman's nephews are associated with the MILF's local base command. When tension between the uncle and the nephews

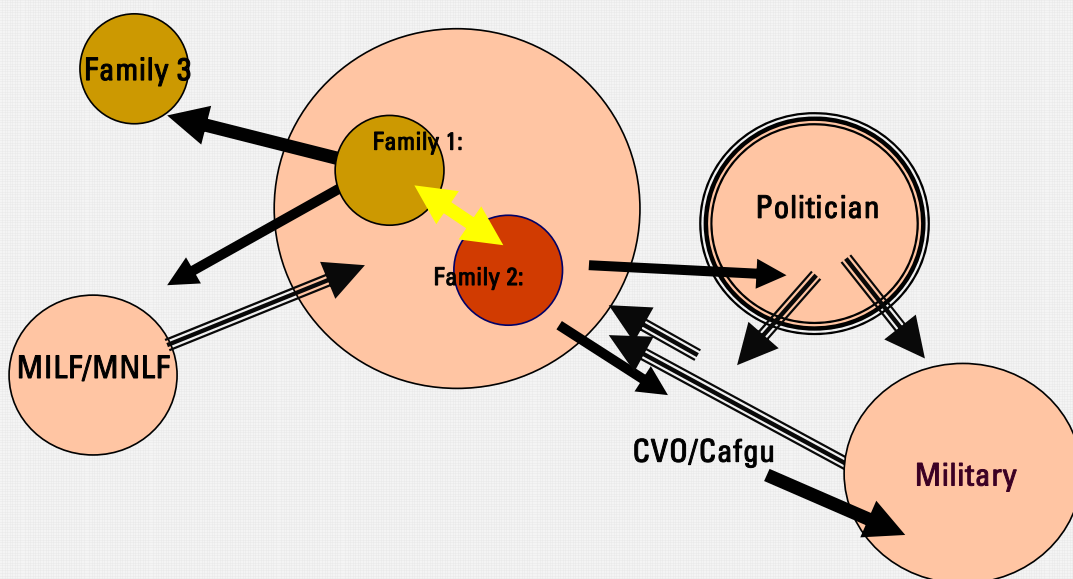
heated up, they successfully drew the military forces and resources of the MILF and government forces into the internal family feud.

In July 2004, retaliatory killings between two feuding families triggered an Army-MILF armed confrontation in Barangay Dapiawan. The alignment of the warring families to either government or MILF forces was also a principal factor that drew the military resources of both forces to the inter-family feud.

Armed confrontation in Gli-gli in 1989 was triggered by a heated basketball game between Maguindanawon and Ilonggo speaking (Christian settler) teen-agers. The game ended in a fistfight between the opposing teams. After the fistfight, the teenagers from the opposing teams went home and reported the incident to their relatives, who were members of the CAGU and MILF's local base commands. The CAGU and MILF local commands intervened and mobilized their forces towards Gli-gli. Once these armed groups were mobilized, the forces of the state and the rebels came into play.

TRACING THE INTERPLAY OF SMALL AND BIG WARS

Typically, the interplay between small and large scale conflicts may start from armed confrontations between warring members in a family or from different feuding families. Some of the members of the feuding families can be commanders or part of the CVO, CAGU, SCAA or of the base commands of either the MNLF or the MILF. When tension heated up, government militias usually mobilize military resources at their disposal, reinforced by allied paramilitary forces and the Army. Families associated with MILF local base commands also tap the forces of the armed group's military forces. Once all forces moved to the battle zones, the family feud expanded into a large scale war. One way of illustrating this interplay is through the conceptual framework below:



Preventing the Interplay of Large and Small Wars: Buliok and Lebpas

In contrast, the Army at Buliok in 2003 and the MILF at Lebpas in 1987 prevented their forces from intervening in community feuds. They avoided taking sides in community conflicts and restrained the deployment of their armed regulars to aid parties they consider as their allies. The absence of armed confrontations between military and MILF forces opened an opportunity for local conflict resolution mechanisms and initiatives to function. Community leaders are presently taking steps in addressing the Buliok feud. Joint conflict resolution efforts by community leaders and of the MILF leadership in President Roxas and nearby Carmen municipality succeeded in resolving the armed tension in Barangay Lebpas.

The resolution of community conflicts demonstrated that small-level conflicts could be effectively contained, even if the actors in these conflicts were also part of the military resources of either the government or armed opposition groups.

The Role of Ceasefire Monitors

The interplay of small and big wars is not inevitable. The armed confrontations in Linantangan and Dapiawan in August 2004 had been effectively de-escalated through quick response and joint negotiating efforts initiated by government-MILF ceasefire committees, civil society-led ceasefire monitoring groups and communities frequently affected by these conflicts.

Government-MILF Ceasefire Committees

The joint government-MILF Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) stood out in effectively preventing and de-escalating armed conflicts. The joint CCCH succeeded in negotiating and advising their warring ground forces of both the government and the MILF that a ceasefire existed. CCCH representatives travel together in the same vehicles as they arrive at running gun battles between government and MILF forces. These gun battles are sometimes complicated by violent confrontations by militias with links to either camp.

Civil Society-led Ceasefire Monitors

Of equally important role in preventing the interplay of small and big wars is the broad network of grassroots based, civil society-led *Bantay* Ceasefire monitoring group. *Bantay* Ceasefire conducts independent investigative missions on armed conflicts. The civil society group also provides crucial information to key members of the joint CCCH about looming tensions and heightening armed confrontation within or near their respective communities.

Success and Opportunities

A significant factor in the success of the joint CCCH and sustained grassroots negotiations initiatives can be traced to their inclusive composition. Both the Armed Forces and the MILF are represented at the core and at the ground forces of the joint committee. The government and MILF's move in assigning ranking military officers with direct access to their respective central leadership coupled with the officers' high degree of credibility among field commanders and ground troops were significant elements in the joint committee's efficiency in defusing armed tensions.

The conduct of joint ground investigations also builds a high level of trust and confidence on both sides. Investigators earn the respect of the joint ceasefire body by suspending judgment during investigations and projecting a non-confrontational attitude. The ceasefire committees' exercise of transparency also boosts the integrity of the body as they effectively open their investigation to scrutiny, dispelling possible doubts about the investigation. Not only do they allow civil society-led ceasefire monitoring teams to independently and simultaneously investigate armed conflict events alongside their own investigations, but they also inform *Bantay* Ceasefire of impending investigations and of joint committee meetings.

Civil society ceasefire monitoring teams are also able to directly communicate with the leaders of the joint CCCH over reports of unfolding armed confrontations on the ground. These reports are often acted on by both sides after the matter is cleared with their superiors. The quick response of the CCCH work is critical in effectively nipping conflicts in the bud. In fact, the speed and mobility of CCCH investigators in responding to unfolding conflicts were important factors in de-escalating the interplay of community and large scale armed conflicts in 2004.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following on the progress of the ceasefire committee work in stopping conflicts, it may be possible to set up an inclusive, non-confrontational, non-judgmental and transparent, body that could work out ways of setting up institutional (government, rebel groups, local governments, communities) quick conflict response and resolution mechanism. This mechanism can be modeled after joint ceasefire initiatives and sustained community negotiations efforts similar to the efforts of the Guinapalad Ta Ka Spaces for Peace in Pikit. These are examples of possible mechanisms that could effectively temper the interplay of small and big war. These mechanisms are in fact modeled from those that are creatively set up by residents in conflict-affected areas through decades of recurring armed conflicts. At the level of the communities, the production of these mechanisms endured.

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