



REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES
SENATE

OFFICE OF SENATOR RICHARD J. GORDON

20 August 2007

Her Excellency GLORIA MACAPAGAL-ARROYO
President of the Philippines
Malacañang, Manila

Dear Madame President:

I would like to submit a report on my visit to Basilan and Sulu last Wednesday and Thursday, in the hope that it may be useful to your administration's initiatives and help in addressing some urgent problems there.

My visit together with my staff was a mission for the Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC) to assess and augment our relief efforts there in light of the recent fighting. We were joined by Mr. Albert Santoli of the Asia-America Initiative, which is providing aid for peace and progress in Mindanao. During our stay, and in my capacity as senator of the republic, I also met with local officials, commanders and civic leaders so as to gain a clear perspective on the situation.

From what we saw and heard first-hand, we believe that the situation in the two islands can considerably be improved if peacekeeping efforts are matched by vigorous action to enhance basic governance – i.e. the projection of government authority and the provision of basic public and social services. Specifically, we noted the following:

1. Despite the recent hostilities in Basilan and Sulu, which have claimed many lives and injured others, the area is by no means a war zone. The situation is under control. The no-guns policy is being enforced effectively by the AFP and the PNP under the leadership of Gen. Romeo Tolentino and Gen. Ruben Rafael. The number of displaced persons is not as large as feared, and they are being assisted by the DSWD, PNRC and other groups. Normal business and social life prevails.

This is not to minimize the seriousness of the terrorist threat and the high toll of lives of recent incidents there. But the fighting has occurred mainly in a few pockets of the two islands where the campaign against terrorist bands, particularly the Abu Sayyaf, is being prosecuted.

The local people, while edgy about the recent fighting and the military presence, are happy about the gun ban. Sulu Governor Abdulsakur Tan told me that he will continue the ban beyond the current situation. He has successfully made all mayors and barangay chairmen report to their posts, where in the past such local officials used to station themselves in Zamboanga City. The mayor of Jolo, Hussin Amin, is fully supporting his initiatives.

The focus of complaint and worry of the local people is not peace and order but the poor provision of basic services (such as schools, water service and roads), the payment of salaries to teachers, and support for economic activities and livelihood.

2. The education situation is disturbing. Many teachers and government employees in Basilan and Sulu are complaining of not having received their salaries for as long as six months and more. They likewise reported that their GSIS premiums totaling over several hundred million pesos had not been remitted to Manila, so they are unable to get loans, health insurance and other benefits that otherwise would have helped to tide them over. They face the prospect of a pensionless retirement if the situation is not corrected. I believe the GSIS must be told to fix its side of the problem once and for all.

Part of the problem also is that many of these teachers and employees have not been properly qualified for government service. They need documentation by the Professional Regulations Commission. Perhaps the quickest way to remedy this problem is for PRC to go to Basilan and Sulu and administer examinations and documentation there. .

Likewise, notwithstanding the fiscal autonomy of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), it is still subject to audit by the Commission on Audit (COA). Failure to do so will empower the President or the Secretary of Finance to reduce, suspend, or cancel the release of funds intended for ARMM to the extent of the amounts that are unaccounted for.

On the bright side, we witnessed some cheering scenes in the schools we visited. In one school, we joined Tausug grade school students in singing the national anthem and reciting the oath of allegiance to the Republic. In another school we saw grade school students gather and listen to a debate among students running for election to their student council. Noteworthy also is the fact that in these schools, the teachers and students go to school in uniform.

We also saw the Asian-American Initiative in action in the schools. It is providing computers, books, livelihood programs, and even Filipino flags to the schools.

It would be good if government can move fast to build and repair more schools, provide water facilities in the region and shore up support for the teachers. There is no lack of desire among the teachers; they have the passion and willingness to educate, as exemplified by their continued work despite not receiving their salaries. In Kasambuhan Elementary School in Indanan, Sulu, there were volunteer teachers in nursery school. Volunteerism was something we saw again and again during our visit.

3. In our visit to the Jolo Integrated Provincial Hospital, we found much to cheer about. Health care services were available. The place was spotless and very orderly. Ancillary services like x-ray were being extended to patients. They had many volunteers in the hospital -- in the wards, the pharmacy and the cleaners. They even had volunteer teachers in the nursery. And there were both student and adult volunteers in the wards

In Basilan, health services and livelihood are inadequate. They do not lack of dedicated and caring people there. But they do need more support and provisions for their services. Above all they need a reliable water service. The latter problem is due to water pipes being dug up and vandalized.

On the part of the Red Cross, we are expanding our presence in the two islands so we can assist even more. Within the month, we will set up a full-fledged blood bank for both Basilan and Sulu by upgrading the present blood station into a blood collection unit. Sulu has been provided with an ambulance. Today, we shipped by C-130 aircraft a brand-new 4-wheel-drive ambulance to Basilan. We have installed a single-side band radio communications in Isabela and Lamitan towns. We

continue to send blood products and supplies and medicine to Basulan and Sulu. We have augmented our staff with foreign conflict-trained personnel to help manage response, relief and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons and other challenges. We are implementing water projects in both islands and we will put up a health station in Albarca, Basilan, the site of the recent ambush.

4. On the economic front, business and commerce go on as usual in both islands. In the campus of the Jolo Agricultural School, we visited a site that used to be a dumping ground for bodies. It is now being used for poultry raising. We found high school and college students bottling sardines, mangosteen and durian. Everywhere we went, we were being offered bananas, lanzones and other fruits. These produce are very cheap in the province. Mangosteen was selling for 5 to 7 pesos per kilo. In Metro Manila, it sells for P100 to P120 per kilo. I believe the President should call on the DTI to help them market these products at better prices. This will do so much to provide livelihood and jobs to the people of Sulu and the entire ARMM area.

Another move that could really help the regional economy is for the government to finish the circumferential road in Isabela City in Basilan and other road projects. General Juancho Saban, the marine brigade commander in Basilan, told me that the completion of the circumferential road will have far-reaching impact on provincial life and commerce because people, goods and relief effort can move more quickly from Isabela to isolated towns. This will pave the way for local prosperity because of the increase in the number of rubber trees and the abundant production of lanzones.

I also suggest that the government invest now in tourism development in Basilan and Sulu. There are small islands there that would be attractive for tourism. Initially, these will serve domestic tourism; but eventually when peace is fully established they can serve foreign tourists as well. Signals of hope are very important to the people in Sulu and Basilan. Under your administration, we never stopped tourism promotion despite the Dos Palmas hostage-taking in Palawan, the bombings in Davao City and Zamboanga City, in order to maintain confidence in our country and our tourism industry. Look at where tourism is now. We are hitting new records in tourist arrivals. This is similar to what Sri Lanka did in the face of rebel attacks that damaged even their main international airport. They did not wait for peace before moving to strengthen and promote their tourism industry. This is exactly what we should be doing now in Basilan and Sulu, two islands that have attractions all their own.

What I am suggesting here, Your Excellency, is that we should consider a change in perspective and approach to the area. The prevailing practice has been to treat Basilan and Sulu as a war zone, whether one is calling for all-out war like the hardliners or for peace talks like the bishops. This has led to a total neglect of the all-important buildup of basic services and infrastructure in the area. But in fact, the situation there is no more severe than in other areas of the country where there are insurgent or rebel activities. Peace and order prevails and the encounters are sporadic and occur mainly in forest areas. Significantly, however, by neglecting to strengthen basic governance in the area, we wind up losing the argument to the extremists and terrorists.

5. After taking everything into account therefore, we believe that the campaign against terrorism will yield more lasting results if the military effort is matched by a comprehensive effort to build up the physical, social and legal infrastructure in Basilan and Sulu, as well as in ARMM in general. The autonomous region is quite simply the poorest in the country. There is need for capacity-building in many areas of public life. We can drain local support for extremism and terrorism if the local people can feel and see vital public and social services and good governance in their midst.

For this kind of capacity-building, assistance from the national government is a must. As I reported previously to Your Excellency after a visit to Tawi-tawi, in Bongao town a bridge donated by the US remains to be built even though the materials for it – valued at several hundred million pesos -- have been there since seven years ago. This infrastructure will not happen unless there is direct intervention and assistance from the national government.

Simply stated, consistency, accountability and follow-through leadership in ARMM and government agencies must be committed to peace and progress in the region. Using best-practice as our model, we have to set up the infrastructure for accountability and standards to implement all funding initiatives.

What we face in the South, finally, is a battle for hearts and minds. The conflict cannot be won by force alone. All groups trying to help there – the military, the private sector, civil society and international aid organizations – share this conviction about the situation. Local people have to believe that there really is a peace dividend, and that in getting from here to there, we will be with them all the way.

In closing I hope this report will be of some assistance to the President's efforts for lasting peace and progress in Basilan and Sulu.

With assurances of my highest consideration, I am

Truly yours,

RICHARD J. GORDON