

The State-Moro Conflict in the Philippines

Lisa Huang, Victor Musembi and Ljiljana Petronic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The struggle for self-determination by the Moro people in the Southern Philippines began in 1565 under Spanish colonial rule and is still an unresolved conflict today. Rooted in primordial notions of homeland, indoctrination, social marginalization, and historical displacement, the Moro people and the government have engaged in multiple rounds of negotiations and produced several agreements. Currently, the Moro conflict is one of two large, deeply-rooted, and long lasting insurgencies featuring repeated peace processes in the Philippines; the other being the stop-start process of peace negotiations with the communist insurgents.

The Moro people are composed of Sunni Muslims with varying linguistic groups which lack unity. The fragmented rebel groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) group and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), have weak legitimacy and bargaining power because of varying interests. The Muslim community perceives that there is a lack of government commitment to provide public goods in tandem to the latter's claim of authority over their territory. Furthermore, even though the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is richly endowed with natural and human resources, poverty and development remain as large concerns.

The Moro people view territory as a means to securing an identity, while Manila's view of territory is directly linked to its physical survival. In addition to territorial claims, the Moro people have experienced social, political and economic discrimination, creating grievances, which, however, are not considered 'atypically severe'¹ but rather limited to 'neglect and remedial policies'². Opportunities for rebel groups are limited by lack of kin groups outside the region from where they might obtain financial support, and a lack of funding by diaspora. The Moro people's motivations stem from desire for increased levels of economic, political, and cultural controls. Full out ethnic war is unlikely since the ethnic groups have indicated acceptance of an agreement short of full independence and the Filipino government is committed to reaching a peace agreement.

To address the conflict between the Moro people and the Filipino government, it is recommended that the state continues on its three-component peace strategy of an agreement with the MILF, reform of the dysfunctional government of the ARMM, and review of the 1996 final peace agreement with the MNLF. In addition, Manila should pay particular attention the area of economical, political, and cultural grievances.

BACKGROUND

The Moro people are a collection of tribal groups (Tausug, Maquindanao, Maranao, Sulu) united by the Sunni Islam religion. The population is roughly 4.6 million people and they account for approximately 5% of the Philippine population.³ The Moro people reside in a concentrated region in the Southern Philippines – the Sulu Archipelago, Mindanao and Palawan (i.e., Moroland).⁴

The struggle for national self-determination dates back to 1565 when the territory came under Spanish colonial rule even though Spain did not legitimately colonized Moroland. It continued when the territory was ceded to the USA in 1898, and after independence in 1946 when it was annexed to the Philippines. Though the Moro people sought to become a US sub-state or to secede, both options were rejected by the Americans, thus it is still an unresolved conflict.⁵ The conflict is rooted in primordial notions of homeland, indoctrination, social marginalization, and historical displacement.⁶ For example, the Land Registration Act and Public Land Act both resulted in the transfer of communal land to newcomers because the Moro people were unable to register their land due to illiteracy and unclaimed lands became state properties.⁷ As of 2011, approximately two million residents have been displaced,⁸ and the estimated number of battle-related deaths ranges from 120,000 to 150,000.⁹ Deaths between 2000 and 2010 are estimated at 6,935 persons.¹⁰ Continued sporadic acts of

violence (amplified by negotiation breakdowns), including bombings carried out by extremists from rebel groups, between the Christian and Moro communities continue to occur, albeit the degree of violence has subsided in recent years as some self-defence groups have chosen to disarm and to negotiate through agreements.¹¹ A ceasefire between the state and the Moro rebels has held since 2008 and the mandate of the international ceasefire monitors from Malaysia has been extended until 2013.¹²

Major actors in the conflict include the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) (125,000 people and 130,000 reserves)¹³, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) – the original rebel group (15,000 people)¹⁴, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (11,000 people)¹⁵ – a more militant rebel group that split from the MNLF, and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) – the most radical Islamic separatist group¹⁶ (400 people)¹⁷, which the USA has included on their foreign terrorist organization list. Other groups include the Pentagon Gang (extremist group) and Lumads (non-Muslim and non-Christian indigenous peoples of Mindanao).¹⁸ Muslim civil society is weak because of varying interests and different loyalties to the MILF, the MNLF, and the ASG.¹⁹ In addition, fractions are occurring between the older and younger members.²⁰

The Moro people's main demands include the protection of their religious and cultural beliefs, desire for safeguards to ensure that jobs and land are not monopolized by the Christian community, a greater share of public funds, and increased economic and political opportunities.²¹ In 2010, the more radical MILF has moved from demanding independence (potentially used as a bargaining tool) to reduced demands of a larger and more powerful “sub-state” that would replace the existing Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).²²

Pressure on the Filipino government has resulted in concessions. In 1976, the Tripoli Agreement established the idea of an autonomous region; in 1987, the Jeddah Accord created the ARMM (only region with its own government) with four provinces (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi) and was extended to five provinces via the 1996 Jakarta Agreement (Basilan). The ARMM accounts for approximately 9% of the Philippines' land area.²³ The Filipino government granted limited executive powers to the ARMM in the areas of public works, labor and employment, local government, environment, natural resources, tourism, science and technology and social services;²⁴ however, the MILF's key objection is an increase in the ARMM's limited political and fiscal authority.²⁵ The central government reinforces the ARMM's dependence on the state through the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) cash transfers, which account for 95% of ARMM funds and create competition between clans, stagnating the negotiation of a treaty agreeable to both the MNLF and MILF (i.e., extracting revenue from resources in the ARMM and then transferring back the funds through political or bureaucratic systems).²⁶ Manila is co-opting the ARMM governors by spending money through PAMANA (Payapa at Masaganang Pamaya-Nan or Peaceful and Resilient Communities), a program that builds the capacity of local governments in conflict zones by transferring money through the villages, municipalities and provinces for infrastructure and development projects, specifically targeting the MNLF communities. Local politicians support the projects and when constituents benefit, the politicians take the credit. PAMANA is Manila's tool to show the ARMM's elites the potential benefits of an agreement with the central government.²⁷

The current government's peace strategy is comprised of three components: 1) peace agreement with the MILF; 2) reform of the dysfunctional government of the ARMM; and 3) review of the 1996 final peace agreement with the MNLF.²⁸ The MILF is demanding extensions to ARMM boundaries and greater autonomy, though Christian politicians oppose this strongly.²⁹ The AFP continues to conduct targeted combat operations against the ASG and extremist groups, which are resorting to criminal activities to fund its operations,³⁰ leading to international concerns that the area may become a terrorist hub.

On April 23-24, 2012, the MILF and the Filipino government signed a document outlining ten principles for negotiations, including provisions for secular ministerial government in the ARMM. Peace talks are continuing with the help of Malaysia as a facilitator.³¹ The commitment to strike a peace deal by President Benigno Aquino III and the behaviour demonstrated by the President (i.e. rejecting calls for an all-out offensive against rebels, refusing calls to scrap the Malaysia-brokered peace talks, disciplining troop members for inappropriate treatment of rebels) show a positive trend towards settlement.³²

CHARACTERISTICS

Governance issues	
Notes	Potential Indicators
<p>-There is the perception that there is lack of government commitment to provide public goods in tandem to the latter's claim of authority over their territory, while Mindanao is richly endowed with natural and human resources</p> <p>-Dysfunctional legal system in the Moro community.</p> <p>- The Moro people suffer from the highest poverty index.</p>	<p>- November 23, 2009: 57 Moro people were killed in unclear circumstances. In the aftermath of the massacre, the government implemented martial law for one week, with limited prospects of a trial for the responsible parties.³³</p> <p>-According to the Philippine Human Development Report of 2005, the average poverty indexes for Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur was in the range of 38.8% to 92% between 1997 and 2003.</p> <p>- Socio-economic conditions continue to worsen as population growth exerts pressure on the capacity of traditional sources of revenue.</p>
The Territorial Claim of the Moro	
Notes	Potential Indicators
<p>-The Moro assert their right to determine their political status since their incorporation to the Philippine state was without their plebicitary consent.</p> <p>- Christians constitute 60% of the total population in the traditional Moroland.</p>	<p>During colonial times, the Moro resisted any attempts to be ruled by them. In addition, their quest to create their own sovereign state started when the entire Philippines was still a colony of the united States of America. Beginning in early 1920s, Muslim leaders of Sulu and Mindanao began a peaceful movement that asserted their right to establish their own-state and form a government of their own. Leaders petitioned and offered two options for the US Congress to consider. Join the Federal Government of the United States, or be declared a separate sovereign state from the would-be Republic of the Philippines. Being part of the Philippines was not among their alternatives³⁴.</p>
Concept	
Notes	Potential Indicators
<p>Strong bias and prejudice of the Christian majority towards the Muslims</p>	<p>- According to a study carried out by the Filipinas Foundation in 1973, it was noted that 54% of the respondents had unfavourable comments towards Muslims.</p> <p>- Spaniards introduced the term 'Moro' in 1565 as a group identity given to the various Islamic ethno-linguistic groups. American political administrators used the term 'Filipino' in reference to those who were Christianised to distinguish them from the Moro.</p>
Struggle for Resources	
Notes	Potential Indicators
<p>- Mindanao has a generally fair tropical climate throughout the year.</p> <p>- Mindanao is richly</p>	<p>- Low degree of political autonomy which would enable Muslims to protect their land and resources.</p> <p>- Resources in Mindanao – Agricultural (percent indicates proportion of Philippine production coming from Mindanao province): rubber 100%, pineapple 91%, cocoa</p>

<p>endowed with various mineral resources such as gold, nickel, limestone etc</p>	<p>90%, bananas, coffee, corn and coconut all over 50%. For minerals: metallic deposits such as lead, zinc, iron, copper, chromites, and gold. Gold mined in Mindanao accounts for nearly half of the national reserve.³⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Currently, the Moro are only entitled to a maximum of 4 hectares as compared to the maximum allowable acreage of 16 hectares for the Filipino homesteader and 1024 hectares for corporations. - Contemporary state land policies—namely, the 1988 Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), carried out ostensibly to create more egalitarian ownership of land resources, and the 1995 Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), supposedly to reclaim and secure the ancestral domain of the indigenous peoples including Muslims—have been ineffective.³⁶
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FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

Using the Duffy Toft framework, the conflict between the Moro people and the Filipino government can be partially explained. The Moro people view the territory they inhabit as tied to the group's identity. Therefore, according to Duffy Toft, control over that territory means a secure identity.³⁷ In contrast, for the Filipino government, control over territory is “directly linked to their physical survival”,³⁸ and keeping the territory is part of their right to territorial integrity. According to Duffy Toft, “where both ethnic groups and states calculate that they need to control the same piece of territory to guarantee their survival, a violent clash is likely to result”.³⁹

Full out ethnic war is unlikely since the ethnic group is willing to accept an outcome short of full independence and only 16% of ARMM respondents support secession.⁴⁰ This is tied to the group's low capability to gain control over the territory it claims, caused in part by the fractionalization of the leadership groups fighting for control (MILF, MNLF, ASG and sometimes others). Legitimacy is also reduced by this fractionalization, but also by the Moro's weak group identity. Since the 1970s, there has been an attempt to recreate the Muslim identity as a national ‘Moro’ identity to encompass all 13 ethno-linguistic Muslim groupings in the Philippines,⁴¹ which has not been entirely successful. This has also been hampered by an additional “war against Muslim traditional politicians and aristocratic leaders who cooperated with the state”,⁴² creating cross-cutting cleavages between the different classes of the Moro. Also reducing capability are the settlement characteristics of the Moro people. The population is concentrated (over 75% reside in the regional base⁴³), which increases capability, but the population is overwhelmingly rural (over 80%⁴⁴), which decreases it.

In addition to these territorial claims, the Collier and Hoeffler framework of Greed and Grievance can also be used to analyze the Moro conflict. The Moro people experience a degree of social, political and economic discrimination at the hands of the state, creating grievances, which, however, are not considered ‘atypically severe’⁴⁵ as ranked by the Minorities at Risk Project (MAR) data, but are limited to ‘neglect and remedial policies’.⁴⁶ However, opportunities for rebel groups are limited by lack of a kin group outside the region from where they might obtain financial support, and a lack of funding from diaspora. Rebel groups’ motivations stem from desire for political control and some potential from extraction of natural resources, which is however currently diminished by other issues such as weak property rights definition and uncertainty about ownership as a result of previous government land appropriations. Instability in the region also deters enterprises from investing in the area. Rebel groups are sometimes perceived with mistrust as local people claim that they do not effectively represent them, which could also be tied to the lack of a unified Moro voice, identity and group leadership.

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

Policy prescriptions for the conflict between the Moro people and the Filipino government will build on the three pronged peace agreement currently underway: 1) reach a peace agreement with the MILF; 2) reform of the dysfunctional government of the ARMM; and 3) review of the 1996 final peace agreement with the MNLF. Specifically, policy prescriptions to address the economic, political and cultural aspects of the conflict will be based on the categorization of a pluralistic society as described by Ted Gurr.⁴⁷

To reduce Moro economic grievances and increase their economic opportunities, the Filipino government will need to ensure Moro representation in public and private employment. This can be accomplished through the use of targets for ethnic proportionality in employment within the public sector and encouraging the employment of Moro people in the private sector through employment incentives. To encourage entrepreneurship, the government could extend preferable lending terms for small businesses to the Moro people. Manila should continue its financial transfers through the IRA and PAMANA, but untie any political agenda from the funding, allowing the ARMM to exercise autonomy in utilizing the funds as it deems appropriate for the region. Lastly, coupled with the encouragement of entrepreneurship, property rights grievances should be addressed through the redistribution of state land for the Moro people and compensation for land that was previously under Moro communal control.

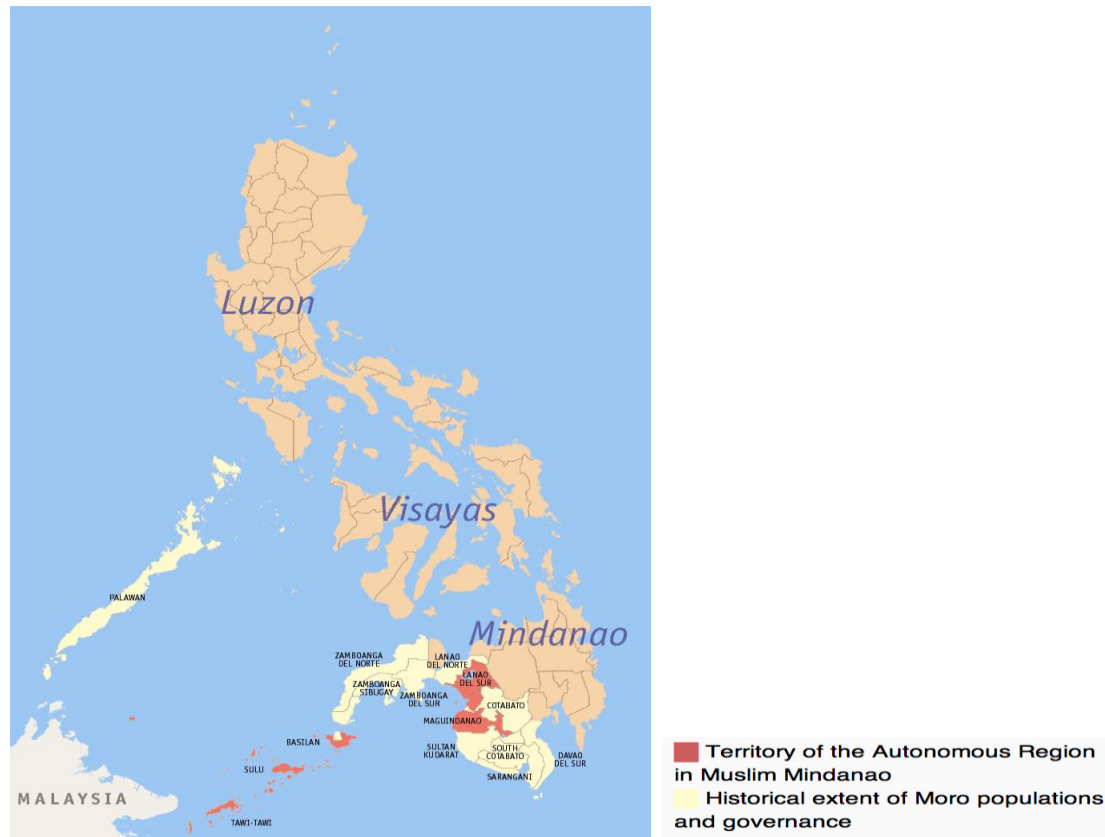
In terms of addressing political grievances, the Filipino government should continue to build on the existing ARMM terms by furthering the level of autonomy the ARMM government will have in managing its own political system. This can be accomplished through group representation in legislative assemblies and governing coalitions at the state and government center. Targets can be set to attain meaningful representation within key decision-making bodies, complimenting Horowitz's prescription that "the way to prevent the loss of a region to which power is devolved is to keep some substantial portion of the population of the region occupied in rewarding roles outside the region, particularly the center."⁴⁸

With respect to cultural grievances, Manila should decentralize education decisions to the ARMM to enable them to determine the needs for secular education opportunities and allow for more instruction in local languages. It is also recommended that a government funded arms-length independent organization, such as an Inter-ethnic Centre, be established to foster inter-ethnic accommodation, facilitate conversation at the civil society level, and diffuse tensions and stereotypes.⁴⁹ To increase awareness and understanding of the Moro culture, the government can encourage and support scholarship and education exchange opportunities between members of the Moro and Christian communities. Amidst the level of distrust between members of society and rebel groups purporting to represent them, undertaking referendums in the future on issues contained in the draft agreements before they are signed between the state and the rebel groups, would help to gauge the level of support from the general public.

To support current negotiations underway, Manila should continue to accept Malaysia as a neutral facilitator for all parties. Manila should enhance support of the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) and similar organizations, as counter-terror and conflict management mechanisms between the MILF and the State. Similar arrangements should be made with MNLF. However, the problem is that it will only work if there is progress on the political front, that is, peace negotiations, so that insurgents see concrete benefits from their cooperation with the government. The government should continue to approach the negotiations with an open mind and avoid the application of tactics that would further deteriorate the level of trust amongst the negotiating parties. Furthermore, after the agreement is signed, a monitoring group comprised of external states such as Malaysia, the USA, Australia and Japan, as well as the Organization of the Islamic Conference and other international groups that are currently engaged in the arena, should make sure the government carries out implementation of the agreement. To enhance the government's capability to maintain the agreement, the international partners should also provide secondary support to build capacity in fighting against extremist terrorists and manage the conflict in the long term.

APPENDIX:

Map of the Southern Philippines (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao)⁵⁰

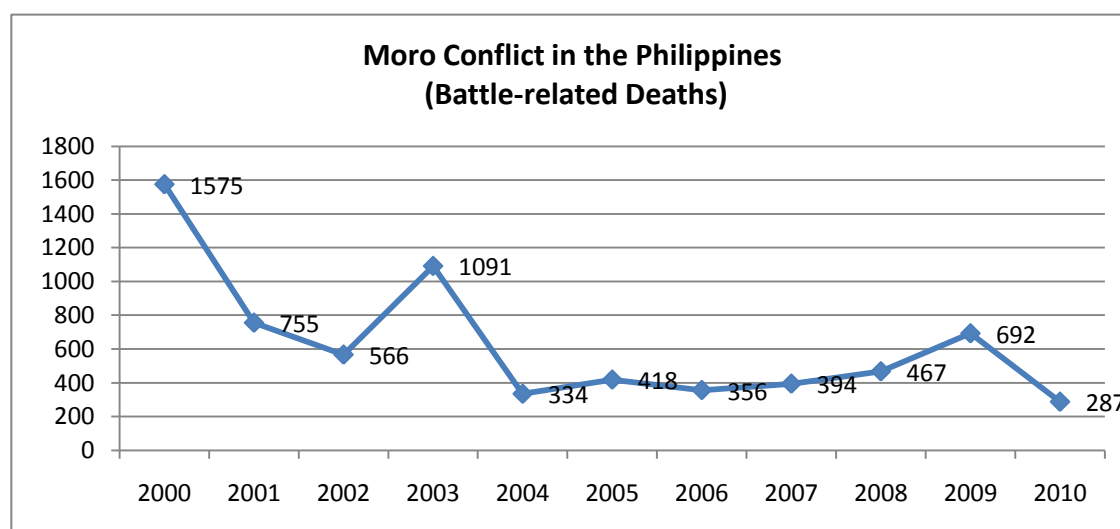


Chronology of Events

Dates	Events	Notes
1565-1898	Spanish occupation	Regalian doctrine – contradicted and nullified the Moro tradition of communal land ownership ⁵¹
1902	Land Registration Act of 1902	Restricted land registration to individuals and corporations, excluding communities and clans ⁵²
1905	Public Land Act	Declared all unregistered land as public land, with no regard for prior occupancy ⁵³
1911-1960s	Resettlement programs	Intensified Moro dislocation by bringing non-Moro to native land ⁵⁴
1919	Amendment to Public Land Act	Allowed Christians to own homesteads up to 24 hectares but non-Christians could apply for only 4; land grabbing by legal means by displacing Moro and other indigenous peoples ⁵⁵
1968	Jabidah Massacre	Government slaughtered 28-64 Moro recruits
1972	President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law	Citing Moro rebellion as a key reason for suspending democracy, full scale war followed
1976	Tripoli Agreement	Established a degree of autonomy for 13 provinces and 9 cities – created ARMM; helped by Libyan government
1978	MILF emerged	MILF became the more militant group, fraction from MNLF
1987	Establishment of the ARMM	Granted limited autonomous power
May 21, 1995	15-year development plan for Mindanao	Focus on improving infrastructure, modernizing fish processing and establishing crop and livestock production and processing centers
December 1995	Interim agreement signed by the MNLF and Manila	Coverage to include education, economic and financial systems, and the autonomous area’s proposed government and administration
1996	Jakarta Peace Agreement	Launched a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process for the integration of the MNLF cadre into the mainstream of the Philippine polity and civilian life.

Dates	Events	Notes
1996	Peace agreement with MNLF and government	1996 Final Peace Agreement (brokered by Indonesia, Organisation on the Islamic Conference), never implemented
April 1996	7-point agreement between the government and the MILF	Focus was to halt hostilities on Mindanao
March 2001	Republic Act	An Act to strengthen and expand the Organic Act for the ARMM – power sharing (ARMM shall be represented only as far as practicable in departments, offices, commissions, agencies and bureaus; provisions to appoint least one cabinet secretary, one supreme court justice and two justices in the court of appeals from ARMM were optional); Moro representation in the central political bodies remained extremely weak; did not establish Moro fiscal independence, limited power in taxation and revenue sharing
5 August 2008	Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain	Formal signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain was aborted because of a court injunction filed by those opposing the draft agreement. For creation of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, and an extension of Bangsamoro homeland in parts of Mindanao and Palawan. ⁵⁶ Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional in October.
2010	MILF dropped demand for independence	MILF settling for a sub-state status similar to that of a US state. Government will have no control for national defence or foreign affairs but will maintain an internal security force
9-10 February 2011	MILF presented its proposal	Demands a new sub-state that would control all aspects of governance except external defence, postal services, foreign relations and currency. Territorial demand same as in the MOA-AD (Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain)
30 June 2011	Republic Act 10153	Government postponing the ARMM elections from August 2011 to May 2013 – interim government run by appointed officers-in-charge
2010-2011	Convergence Strategy	Address issues including transitional government, wealth sharing, territory and a development agency for Bangsamoro
22-23 April, 2012	MILF and Filipino government signed an agreement	The agreement outlines 10 principles for negotiations, including provisions for secular ministerial government in a new Muslim autonomous region.

Moro Conflict – Battle-related Deaths⁵⁷



ENDNOTES

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