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Women Take on Mindanao Rebels for Peace to Unlock \$300B

By Joel Guinto and Clarissa Batino

Of the more than a dozen women Philippine President Benigno Aquino appointed to senior administration posts since gaining power in June 2010, one of the most diplomatically sensitive was Miriam Coronel-Ferrer.

Coronel-Ferrer's credentials for the position of chief negotiator with rebels from the embattled island of Mindanao were excellent: A member of the peace panel since 2010, she was a political-science professor at the University of the Philippines in Quezon City near Manila and an advocate of a negotiated settlement for more than a decade. The problem was whether her gender would be an issue with the rebels.

"I'm not anti-women, but is your counterpart ready?" Coronel-Ferrer, 54, recalls Aquino saying. At that time, the all-male team of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF, assured Aquino it would accept anyone he appointed.

Success after four decades of conflict would help reintegrate the Muslim-majority region with the largely Catholic nation and boost incentives for investment in an estimated \$300 billion of minerals and resources. Failure would risk a resurgence of fighting that has cost as many as 200,000 lives. Coronel-Ferrer has won agreements in the past year on the key issues of wealth- and power-sharing and aims for a final accord with the biggest rebel group in talks scheduled for next month.

"What's at stake is a golden opportunity that could potentially bring much-needed foreign direct investment," said Jeff Ng, an economist at Standard Chartered Plc in Singapore who has examined the impact of the conflict on the Philippines. He estimates a peace accord could boost the nation's gross domestic product growth by as much as 0.3 percentage point.

Typhoon Damage

The economic boost would help offset damage from Typhoon Haiyan, which killed more than 6,000 people in November. The government has the momentum to complete a final peace deal next month, Coronel-Ferrer said on Dec. 17.

Mindanao can attract as much as \$1 billion of investments after an agreement is reached, Trade Undersecretary Adrian Cristobal said in an interview on Oct. 24. Investment pledges in the first nine months jumped more than four times from a year earlier, with projects mostly in power and property, he said.

"Once you have the peace deal in place, there will be stronger investor interest in the region," Cristobal said. "Investments won't be immediate, but \$1 billion is feasible."

The biggest initial benefits from a peace deal may come from mining. The rebels will get 75 percent of the royalties from metals and an equal share with the national government on fossil fuels, according to the agreement signed in July.

A unit of San Miguel Corp. (SMC) is building a 600-megawatt coal-fired power plant in Mindanao, the company's first in the southern island. Manila Electric Co., the nation's largest power retailer, which is returning to generation after a four-decade hiatus, plans to erect a 300-megawatt coal-fired plant.

Poorest Provinces

The nation's \$250 billion economy expanded 7.65 percent in the first half from a year earlier, outpacing China, before growing at 7 percent in the three months through September.

The development hasn't been even. While the capital Manila has boomed, the struggle with rebels seeking an independent Muslim state has left Mindanao with two of the poorest provinces in the Philippines: Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao.

The incidence of poverty across the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, or ARMM -- a delineation created during a previous attempt at peace -- climbed to 48.7 percent in 2012 from 39.9 percent in 2009, according to the National Statistical Coordination Board in its latest report. The agency defines poverty as living on less than \$1.20 a day.

The government and the MILF have signed three of the four annexes needed to forge a final accord, with the deal on power-sharing completed on Dec. 8. In January, the two groups will discuss the schedule of disarming the rebels and approving judicial compensation for the victims of fighting.

Power Sharing

"This peace is in sight with the signing of the annex on power-sharing," Aquino said in a speech in Manila on Dec. 19.

Coronel-Ferrer, the first female head of the government's peace panel, was part of the team led by Marvic Leonen that negotiated a framework peace agreement signed in October 2012. She took over in December 2012 after Leonen was appointed as judge at the nation's top court.

Together with Teresita Deles, 65, Aquino's adviser on the peace process, Coronel-Ferrer is pushing for an expansion of the role of women in the post-conflict development plan.

"In the beginning, it was a stumbling block but that has been overcome," Coronel-Ferrer said of being a female negotiator with the Muslim rebels. "Let's just say it creates a different dynamic."

Coronel-Ferrer's mostly female team includes Iona Jalijali, 39, who helped draft a bill to promote breast feeding by regulating advertising of baby formula. She sometimes attended the talks with a bag of expressed milk for her son on the table.

Muslim Tradition

Mohagher Iqbal, Ferrer's counterpart on the rebel panel said he initially found it "very challenging" to deal with women in the talks.

"It is not in my character to shout, but it would have been easier between gentlemen -- no inhibitions," said Iqbal, who has negotiated for the MILF for a decade. "Under Muslim tradition, we have the highest respect for women," making it difficult to argue, he said.

Even as negotiations with the MILF were taking place this year, other armed groups continued to battle government forces in Mindanao. More than 400 fighters of Nur Misuari, a former governor of the autonomous region and head of one of the factions of the Moro National Liberation Front, or MNLF, attacked coastal villages around Zamboanga City in September, burning houses and forcing 100,000 to flee.

In three weeks of fighting, at least 203 people died and 288 rebels were arrested. Misuari, who founded the MNLF in 1969 to fight for an independent Muslim state, escaped and may be hiding in Sulu, according to the police.

'Visible' Participant

The Philippines sought support this month from the worldwide Organization of Islamic Cooperation to review the 1996 peace deal with the MNLF and converge it with the MILF agreements, the Department of Foreign Affairs said on Dec. 16.

An earlier peace agreement, signed in 1996 with Misuari's MNLF during the presidency of Fidel Ramos, collapsed partly because "it was struck by men through a combatant structure that failed to put post-conflict rebuilding mechanisms in place," Deles said in an interview in Manila on July 24. "If we don't put women now as a priority and visible participant, then that's likely to happen again."

The MILF in August introduced a woman, Raissa Jajurie, on their team for the first time. During the power-sharing talks in December, the Philippine team had nine women and three men and the MILF camp had two women, Coronel-Ferrer said.

Chocolate Box

Coronel-Ferrer led a group of women on Feb. 14 last year who gave each of their male counterparts a heart-shaped box of Ferrero Rocher chocolates as a Valentine's Day gift before starting a day-long debate over the inclusion of a line on the "meaningful participation" of women in the framework agreement that Aquino and the rebels signed eight months later.

Giving women a larger role in their communities is vital to securing a lasting peace, said Coronel-Ferrer, who leaves the cooking and other chores to her "very supportive" husband, a partnership that she says has liberated her to do other things.

"The desire of Bangsamoro women to play more significant roles is blossoming," said Coronel-Ferrer, who has two children and three grandchildren. "We will see more women taking active roles, not just as wives or mothers or sisters of politicians but because they are leaders in their communities."