

BY Jess Dureza

**CROSSING SIMUAY** — A few days ago, I visited the MILF “advance command post” at Crossing Simuay at Sultan Kudarat town in Maguindanao and got a first hand briefing from its Vice Chair Ghadzali “GJ” Jaafar and panel chair, Mohaqher Iqbal together with some American journalists who came.

That was to be my most recent visit after so long a time. The MILF hideaway looked different from what I saw then several years ago. The trees have grown big, the nipa thatched structures are now concrete. I saw only one armed MILF who was inside the fenced area, unlike in the past.

And my friend Vice chair “GJ” looked heavier but jubilant and warm as always. I have not seen him also for years. For chair Mohagher we had been regularly bumping into each other in airports, various forums and consultations — the latest was in the AIM forum in Makati and the trip to Penang, Malaysia early this year when we met with the other militant groups from Indonesia and Thailand. It was still mid-day of fasting but the dialogue was animated and substantive.

The MILF “liaison” office in Crossing Simuay is memorable to me. I had several important meetings in “GJ’s” compound while I was working for peace in Mindanao during FVR’s and GMA’s time.

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**MEMORABLE** — One previous visit stood out. I can’t recall the date. I was supposed to meet with MILF leaders for an important meeting there when the small plane provided by the Philippine National Police to shuttle me to Cotabato had to do an emergency landing back at the Davao airport when its right engine bellowed smoke shortly after take-off. I recall my staff Ollie Dagala frantically trying to catch my attention while already airborne when he first noticed smoke coming out of the engine. The plane lamely turned around and bumpily landed after a few minutes that seemed like agonizing hours.. We landed without incident. But there was still a big problem: how to get to Crossing Simuay on time for the meeting. I was told the MILF leaders were there waiting. I didn’t want to be blamed for an “outbreak of hostilities” because of a no-show. Luckily, a helicopter of the National Power Corporation was sitting at the tarmac of the Davao airport on its way somewhere. I practically commandeered it, convincing the pilot jokingly that a war would break out if he would not give me a lift. He obliged merrily. I arrived at the Simuay meeting on time — with a few jittery moments of course along the way. The plane incident shook me a bit that I cannot even recall now what we discussed in that crucial meeting. I also vowed not to borrow PNP planes again in my future sorties.

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**EAST WEST CENTER** — This time, Crossing Simuay played host to a group of journalists who were participants of the 2011 Senior Journalists Seminar of the East West Center in Honolulu. They were around to look into the various aspects of how Muslims fare in Mindanao. They met

with the Mindanao Development Authority, then with Lt. Gen. Raymundo Ferrer of the Western Mindanao Command who had a long experience in Muslim Mindanao, then with the Islamic school pupils and teachers in Bugac Maa, Davao City. A good dialogue took place with the Bishop Ulama Conference at the archbishop's palace of Archbishop Fernando Capalla. Also, they had dinner with host families (Joe and Inday Santiago and Ethel Cantor Constantino) and visited a peace and development community in Barangay Aplaya, Davao del Sur before proceeding to Crossing Simuay. Of course, coming to Davao City in the midst of the annual Kadayawan festival, although coincidental, was bonus to the journalists. Advocacy MindaNOW Foundation, Inc that I head made the arrangements of the 3-day visit. They are now off to Dhaka for the final leg of their seminar.

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MISUARI'S ASSEMBLY — Coincidentally, while we were en route to Sultan Kudarat town, I noticed jeep loads of Muslims, some in dump trucks and vans, bedecked with MNLF banners, rushing towards Davao City. Back in Davao City the following day, I saw thousands of MNLF elements and constituents gathered at the soccer field by the Davao River with Chairman Nur "Maas" Misuari conducting an assembly exhorting his followers to stay united for the cause of the bangsamoro.

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BALANCING ACT — MILF Chair Iqbal said he was preparing to leave for Malaysia for the August 22 peace talks with the Philippine government. It will be interesting to see what comes out of that meeting as an aftermath of the Pnoy-Murad one-on-one parley in Tokyo.

It will also be interesting to see how the government balances the need to engage Nur Misuari's MNLF and Kagi Murad's MILF aspirations. After all, they all belong to the same bangsamoro.