

The absence of any encounter this year between the military and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front enabled farmers in Central Mindanao to peacefully forge ahead with costly projects meant to convert the region into a livestock, rubber and oil palm hub.

Except for some isolated atrocities perpetrated by bandits belonging to the outlawed Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the region was peaceful, with “zero” military-MILF encounter, in the past 11 months.

The BIFF, which is led by extremists, among them the now paralytic Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato, is not covered by the July 1997 Agreement on General Cessation of Hostilities between the government and the MILF.

It was this year when farmers in far-flung areas in Central Mindanao's adjoining North Cotabato and Maguindanao provinces benefited extensively from economic interventions by their respective provincial governments.

The livelihood projects were implemented in support of the socio-economic agenda of the on-going GPH-MILF peace overture.

“I wish the tranquility we now experience in our communities will continue in the years to come so we can focus on activities that can generate income needed to sustain the schooling of our children,” Mutalib Tantung, a Moro farmer in S.K. Pendatun town in Maguindanao, said in the local vernacular.

Tantung is one of more than 50,000 farmers in Maguindanao who received free rubber tree and oil palm seedlings dispersed in the past 11 months by the provincial government under the “plant now, pay never” project of Gov. Esmael Mangudadatu.

Thousands had received seedlings and farm animals from the Maguindanao provincial government from 2010 to late 2012. Maguindanao is one of the five provinces of the

Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

In North Cotabato, hundreds of farmers in flood and conflict-stricken areas also benefited from the animal and seedling dispersal activities of Gov. Emmylou Talino-Mendoza from January to early December this year.

North Cotabato, which is under Administrative Region 12, has three congressional districts that are home to mixed Moro, Christian and non-Moro indigenous highland communities.

Mendoza's office also distributed water buffaloes and hybrid goats to Christian and Moro farmers in North Cotabato in recent months.

Some of the beneficiaries of the community agricultural interventions initiated by the Maguindanao and North Cotabato provincial governments are members of the MILF and its rival, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The MNLF signed a peace deal with government on September 2, 1996.

Chief Supt. Noel Delos Reyes, police director of ARMM, said it was the community projects of the Maguindanao provincial government that virtually softened the hearts of followers of MNLF founder Nur Misuari in the province and made them decide to just calmly stand down as their companions laid siege in Zamboanga City last September.

Many of the more than 4,000 scholars of the Maguindanao Program on Educational Assistance and Community Enhancement (MagPEACE), bankrolled by the office of Mangudadatu, are children of MILF and MNLF members, according to Lynette Estandarte, Maguindanao's chief provincial budget officer.

"Naturally, because we have peace education subjects, these scholars help educate their parents on the importance of resolving security problems through dialogues. This learning

process is good for the Mindanao peace,” commented Engineer Sukarno Datukan, administrator of the government-run Upi Agricultural School in North Upi town in Maguindanao.

MNLF members in North Cotabato had also committed to Mendoza, who, like Mangudadatu, is now in her second term as provincial governor, not to embark on anything that can derail the fragile peace now in their enclaves in the province.

Peace activists in Central Mindanao, among them Catholic priests and leaders of various Christian sects, are convinced the government and MILF panels can strike a final peace compact by 2014.

Peace talks between the government and the MILF started January 7, 1997, punctuated by security problems that caused its suspension many times over, and gained headway in 2003 with the help of Malaysia as facilitator.

The GPH-MILF peace talks is being assisted by Japan, the European Union, Norway, Malaysia, Indonesia, and several other international donor organizations, and foreign peace advocacy entities, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a bloc of more than 50 Muslim countries.

Officials of the Army’s 6th Infantry Division, which has jurisdiction over Central Mindanao, including parts of Lanao del Sur, said the religious enforcement by the government and MILF of the 1997 ceasefire accord in the region is expected to gain more dividends in 2014.

“It is the Moro farmers that stand to benefit from the normalcy the ceasefire will usher in. Their productivity will improve. Their income will, as a consequence, increase too,” said Col. Noli Orense, commanding officer of the Army’s 603rd Brigade.