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Apec-Misuari

NUR MISUARI EMBARKS ON MASSIVE RECONSTRUCTION FOR MINDANAO

By: Yong Soo Heong

MANILA, Nov 24 (Bernama) -- When one-time freedom fighter Nur Misuari said he wanted to have six-lane highways for his Moro people in Mindanao in southern Philippines, he was ridiculed.

But now that he is governor of Mindanao, he is talking about 10-lane expressways because he is taking a long-term view that development will soon come to his region and that such infrastructure must be in place to build a better future for his people.

"I don't want to expose my people, especially the children, to the dangers of poor road systems," Nur Misuari said in an interview with the Malaysian press.

As things stand now, the skeptics still do not believe that he can pull it off because a critical factor for such projects is funds.

However, Nur Misuari, who fought a 28-year war against the Philippine authorities, is riding on a crest of optimism.

He said that money was everywhere in the world and it was up to the leaders in Mindanao to attract it.

For a start, he said, he could count on his Muslim brothers in Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and West Asia.

The Islamic Development Bank is another source where funds could be tapped to reconstruct his region and bring benefits to his people.

But it is not just from the Muslim world that he has managed to grab widespread international attention. Now that peace has returned to Mindanao following a peace agreement with President Fidel V Ramos on Sept 2, investors from other parts of the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, the United States, Spain, Italy, France and Germany are knocking on Nur Misuari's door.

This keeps him busy right up to the middle of next year with visits planned to those countries in his quest to bring greater economic and social benefits to his people.

For instance, officials of a Spanish consortium which will build a railway system in Mindanao were told that the system would be among the best in the world.

"I told them that I would not settle for anything short of the best in the world in order to make up for the many years of suffering," said the governor who met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad here yesterday.

Nur Misuari, who is chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front, said that during the fight against the Philippine central authorities, many of his people only had one meal a day, sometimes once in two days.

"But that is the price of war and freedom," he said with a glint in his eye.

Now that peace has been attained, Nur Misuari's immediate task is to work towards massive reconstruction of his region.

He said: "All I want now is for my people to forget the tragic memories and ugly past and be inspired by the prospects of a bright future.

"I want to obliterate the ugly vestiges of war. They are very conspicuous in Mindanao. Now that we have this peace, we will attend to the transformation of our society.

"We want to catch up with our Muslim brothers within the region. For now, we want to learn from their experience of development."

To get things going, Nur Misuari, whose headgear of a gold-lined

"songkok" differentiates him from the rest of the crowd here, said he would put in place a telephone system in every village in Mindanao.

Saying that he was inspired by the dynamism of Dr Mahathir in bringing tremendous development to Malaysia, Nur Misuari said building four and five-star hotels was also on his list of priorities to cater for the anticipated increased flow of businessmen and tourists to his autonomous region.

And he is also talking about getting tie ups with other airlines in the region or even acquiring aircraft like the Airbus A330 or Boeing 747.

This multi-prong aviation strategy is not only to get businessmen and holiday-makers to Mindanao but also to get Filipino Muslims to perform the annual "haj" pilgrimage in Mecca.

To complement these economic activities, he is also keen on building more international airports and seaports.

Nur Misuari is optimistic that the provision of better investment incentives and Mindanao's rich natural resources, especially mineral deposits, and relatively undeveloped territory will be able to see development through in the future.

"With more foreign investments, there will be more money in circulation and this will help in the capital formation proces," he said.

Asked on some lingering pockets of insurgency in Mindanao, he said this was caused by a few groups outside the ambit of the MNLF's peace agreement with Ramos prior to these groups' impending peace talks with the central government.

Saying that these isolated cases amounted to a show of strength by the parties concerned, Nur Misuari added that Ramos had also asked to resolve the problems.

"I intend to do everything in my influence to contain, curb or even eliminate this problem once and for all. Once I come back from an overseas trip in about a week, I will assemble all our resources and try my best to find ways to expeditiously resolve this problem. I am very optimistic we can do something," he said. -- BERNAMA

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