

19 DEC 1996

Misuari-Diplomacy

MISUARI TO USE "PERSUASIVE ISLAMIC DIPLOMACY" TO PROMOTE PEACE

PETALING JAYA, Dec 19 (Bernama) -- Nur Misuari vowed today to use what he calls "persuasive Islamic diplomacy" to get Muslim factions not aligned to his Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to help implement the Sept 2 peace agreement that ended 25 years of armed conflict in the southern Philippines.

Misuari, who was elected governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARRM) following the historic peace accord between the MNLF and the Manila government, said his Islamic diplomacy would be "more powerful than the most powerful guns in the Philippine arsenal".

"We can find the formula through Islam and not through arms. This is already working and Mindanao is now relatively more peaceful than ever before," he told a luncheon talk at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations here.

Misuari, who is here with a 20-member delegation to woo Malaysian investors to help in the reconstruction of Mindanao, dismissed suggestions that squabbles among the Muslim factions themselves -- and not between the Muslim and Christian groups -- could turn the region into another Afghanistan.

"I assure you that this will never happen. Yes, the past and present leaders of factions which governed Afghanistan are all my friends. But we have different mentality," said the former university professor who delivered a polished 90-minute off-the-cuff lecture on the political and security situation in Mindanao.

Also present were Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Chief of Armed Forces Jen Tan Sri Ismail Omar.

Misuari said while a permanent and durable peace was pivotal for the economic reconstruction of Mindanao, it was equally important that the economic dividends of peace be seen quickly by the Mindanao people.

His week-long Malaysian visit, he said, was mainly to seek help to get the essential infrastructure projects started so as to revive economic activities and thus reduce the socio-political strains in a region where such deprivations had caused the conflict in the first place.

Misuari said he always knew that he could count on "my Malaysian brothers" in this hour of need, adding that he was most encouraged by assurances of assistance in whatever ways possible for Mindanao coming from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"Peace is a means to another end -- that of economic development," he said.

Mindanao badly needs roads, airports, seaports, schools, hospitals and housing to improve its economy as well as for "our people to partake in the bounties that we have".

"Already we have been signing so many MoUs (memoranda of understanding), including with Malaysian companies which want to invest there," he said.

He told the luncheon guests, who were mainly serving and retired diplomats, that investors putting their money in Mindanao were in for some exciting times because the region is rich in gold, nickel, petroleum and gas.

The petroleum deposits are estimated at billions of barrels while five trillion cubic feet of natural gas have been found in Mindanao, which has

30 million people including six million Muslims.

"Normally, I was told, oil would be discovered after drilling between 7,000 and 12,000 feet but in Mindanao this black gold was found at 4,000 feet. So the economic prospects are indeed very bright," he said.

He said Petronas, Malaysia's national oil corporation, had indicated it was keen to prospect for oil in the area.

During the question and answer session, Misuari was asked what made him finally decide to sign the peace accord, and whether it had anything to do with the offer of the governor's post.

"Give peace a chance," was his quick reply. But he added that the ARRM was only an interim mechanism lasting for two-and-a-half years, while the Tripoli Agreement signed in the early 1980s which provided for self-rule in the autonomous Muslim Mindanao was still intact and would eventually be implemented in letter and spirit.

Giving credit to the leadership of Philippines President Fidel Ramos, he said the timing was right for the peace agreement because not to have done so could lead to a total collapse of the peace process and to war.

As he put it: "Of course, we on our part had to make certain little concessions from our original demands. But I strongly believe that we will more than make up for in other ways for the people in the 14 of the 24 provinces in Mindanao that are under our jurisdiction." -- BERNAMA

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