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Manila, Mindanao rebels sign pact to cease hostilities

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THE Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) yesterday signed an agreement on the cessation of hostilities in the southern island of Mindanao.

The parties agreed to normalise the situation in Mindanao and pave the way for relief, rehabilitation and development programmes.

Representing the Philippine Government at the signing held in Putrajaya were acting chairman of the technical committee of the Philippine Peace Panel (GRP Panel) Irene Santiago and presidential assistant for Mindanao and head of the GRP Panel, Hesus Dureza.

MILF was represented by vice chairman Murad Ebrahim and peace panel technical committee chairman Mussib Buat.

The signing was witnessed by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, prior to talks between visiting Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

MILF also signed a unity agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

A breakaway group of the MNLF, the MILF was formed in 1978, two years after the signing of the first agreement between MNLF leader Nur Misuari and Imelda Marcos, wife of then president Ferdinand Marcos in Tripoli, Libya.

With the agreement, both parties agreed that the Moro people would be represented under one name, that is the Bangsa Moro Solidarity Conference.

Speaking to reporters after the delegation meeting between Malaysia and the Philippines, Syed Hamid said Malaysia's optimistic and pragmatic approach in settling complicated race-related, political and other issues in the country were to become its best selling points in being accepted as a middleman between the two Muslim-based rival organisations in the southern Philippines.

"In our approach to settling conflicts, we have always stressed that economic development is not possible without peace and stability.

"Malaysia for one has promised that it will assist in whatever way it can to settle the conflict and in fact it has made good its promise by investing in the region.

"The conclusion of the peace agreement goes to show the confidence of both parties, including the Philippine Government, in the leadership of Dr Mahathir," Syed Hamid said.

He said the agreements would also pave the way for rehabilitation and development programmes in Mindanao.

On the meeting between Malaysian and Philippine delegates, Syed Hamid said it touched on several matters of mutual interest, including the jumpstart of the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines East Asia Growth Asia (BIMP-EAGA) cooperation and the promotion of investment in various economic sectors in the Philippines, especially in the steel and plantation sectors.

"Both parties also discussed the issue of illegal Filipino workers in Malaysia.

"The Philippines is appreciative of Malaysia's efforts to legalise about 120,000 Filipino workers without legal working permits, of whom 60,000 have been issued with passports by the Philippine Government," he said.

Syed Hamid said both countries also looked into the possibility of extending the Asean Gas Pipeline from Sabah to the Philippines, in

addition to the exchange of expertise in the agricultural and plantation sectors.

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