

18 OCT 2001

Mindanao-Manual

PHILIPPINE GOVT AND MILF SIGN AGREEMENT TO CONSOLIDATE PEACE PROCESS

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 18 (Bernama) -- The Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) today signed behind closed doors here an agreement on a manual for ending hostilities in Mindanao, the troubled southern Philippine state.

The MILF chief negotiator Murad Ebrahim said the move would pave the way for the establishment of local monitoring teams, comprising non-governmental organisations as well as MILF and government officials, to oversee the ceasefire there.

"The manual signed today would contain procedures and instructions for local monitoring teams, which would have to prepare reports on the situation on the ground and they would start immediately," Murad told reporters after the signing minutes before senior officials of both parties began the third round of formal peace talks in Mindanao.

The two sides had been engaged in talks at the Mines Beach Resort Hotel here since Monday to iron out technical aspects of the peace accord reached by the Philippine government and the MILF early this year.

The signing of the Malaysia-brokered peace agreement here was witnessed by the Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and visiting Philippine president Gloria Arroyo.

Murad said the meeting this time around was to put into action what had already agreed to in the peace deal.

Manila's chief negotiator Jesus G. Dureza said with the manual agreed by both parties they could now go to the ground and arrange workshops for the officials who would implement the ceasefire provisions.

"This is the important part, we have to see the reality on the ground and work accordingly to maintain the ceasefire," Dureza said.

Despite having signed the peace accord earlier this year, the two parties had on numerous occasions been engaged in violent battles due to lapses in the implementation of the peace process, including the failure to establish a Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities to supervise and implement the ceasefire agreement.

"There had been some incidents of violence but we cannot put the blame for this on one party alone...every incident had a different background but now they have a ground rule to follow," said Dureza.

The two parties would over the next two days concentrate on trashing out details for the rehabilitation and development of the conflict areas in Mindanao and the issue of ancestral domain of the native people there.

An agreement on this was expected to be inked before the current round of talks ends on Saturday.

Summing up their talks over the last three days, Dureza said both sides were highly confident that more agreements would be reached.

"This is a sincere effort by both sides and we are optimistic we could reach more such agreements...we pray for sincerity of both the sides in achieving lasting peace in Mindanao," echoed Murad, who is also vice-chairman for military affairs and chief of staff of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces.

-- BERNAMA

SR ZS RYN