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Umbrella body for Moros

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CYBERJAYA, Fri. - The two largest separatist factions in Muslim Mindanao will be represented under one umbrella body to champion their cause when they formally sign a peace agreement in Malaysia on Tuesday.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said today that the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) would be unified under the Bangsa Moro Solidarity Conference.

"The unity will provide Bangsa Moro a mechanism for a collective approach when dealing with the Philippine Government and others, including the Organisation of Islamic Conference," he said.

Since the break-up of the MNLF and the formation of the MILF in 1976, the MNLF was recognised as the sole representative of Bangsa Moro (which represents the Tausug, Meranao and Maguindanao tribes in Mindanao) at the OIC.

The break-up had been a setback to the struggle of the five million Muslims in Mindanao.

"Unification is of paramount importance to provide a single leadership to resolve and accelerate peace, stability, political empowerment, social upliftment and economic development in Muslim Mindanao," Najib said after witnessing the initialling ceremony of the unity talks between the MNLF and MILF at Cyber View Lodge.

MNLF executive council member Hatimil Hassan and MILF vice-chairman Murad Ibrahim officiated at the ceremony that marked an intent for unification. Also present were Libyan Ambassador to the Philippines Salem Adem, and three officials from the Philippine Government - presidential adviser on special conditions Norbeto Gonzales, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency director-general Brig-Gen Cesar Garcia and the under-secretary of the Office of the presidential adviser on the peace process Sylvestre Afable.

Najib said the initialling ceremony today, which paved the way for forging unification in the southern Philippines, also signalled the endorsement of the on-going ceasefire between the MNLF and MILF.

"There will be no more conflicts on the ground between them. It is now incumbent on both sides to work towards maintaining peace and prosperity to ensure justice and freedom for the Moro people.

"The forthcoming peace agreement will be the beginning of a new era in Mindanao."

Najib said that Malaysia and the OIC member countries welcomed the unification since talks began in April.

"Time has proven that a negotiated settlement is the best deal," Najib said.

The formal agreement is expected to be signed at Putrajaya on Tuesday in the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo during the latter's two-day state visit here.

MNLF leader Nur Misuari and MILF chairman Salamad Hashim are also expected to attend. Both the MNLF and MILF hope the agreement would complement the existing solutions stipulated in the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 (where Misuari obtained a peace agreement with the Philippine Government) and the Jakarta Accord of 1996 (that led to the formation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao with Misuari elected as its governor).

The MNLF is working on the second phase of the implementation of the Jakarta Accord, while the MILF is currently involved with negotiations with the Philippine Government for peace in Mindanao.

Meanwhile, both Hatimil and Murad expressed gratitude to Malaysia, Libya and the OIC for their unending efforts in assisting in their unification.

Stressing that unity was the key to peace, Hatimil said the MNLF was committed to implementing the peace agreement as it wished to see peace, progress and the development of its people.

Already, Murad said, the Philippine government had supported the move to obtain a peace agreement with them at two recent meetings - one in Kuala Lumpur on Mar 24 and the other in Tripoli, Libya, on June 22, both this year.