

MILF, Manila to hold talks in KL within days

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MANILA, Fri. — Peace talks between the Philippine Government and Muslim separatists in the south could start in Malaysia within days, Kuala Lumpur's ambassador to Manila said today.

Saying the decades-old rebellion in the Mindanao region is a threat to Malaysia's national security, Ambassador Taufik Mohamed Noor urged the two sides to try their best to conclude a political settlement within 90 days.

The 12,500-member MILF has been waging a 25-year guerilla campaign to set up an Islamic state in the southern third of the largely Roman Catholic Philippines, which is also beset by a 34-year communist insurgency.

Taufik said President Gloria Arroyo's emissaries met Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) counterparts in Kuala Lumpur last weekend after Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's government convinced the MILF to return to the negotiating table.

"What has been agreed is for the peace talks to start as soon as possible.

"I think it could start within days, I would imagine," he said, adding that the situation was now "conducive" to restarting talks disrupted by an upsurge of guerilla violence in March.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Blas Ople earlier said he expected the stalled talks to resume by July 1.

Taufik urged Manila to suspend arrest warrants and bounties — issued against MILF leader Salamat Hashim and other key lieutenants for their alleged role in a series of bombings and raids that claimed about 100 lives in Mindanao since March — so they could travel to Malaysia and lead the talks.

He noted that the MILF has complied with other conditions, including its declaration of a unilateral ceasefire this month and Hashim's making a public statement denouncing terrorism.

But Arroyo spokesman Ignacio Bunye said the issue of arrest warrants "would have to be tackled at a later stage".

Arroyo said in a statement: "We have a separate doctrine for peace, for law enforcement, and for fighting terrorism.

"Upholding the law and fighting

terror shall not relent even in the presence of the peace process."

Taufik said the Malaysian foreign ministry was meeting today to consider a Philippine request for Malaysia to lead an international "ceasefire monitoring team" that would also include soldiers from Bangladesh, Bahrain and Libya.

Barring any major unforeseen obstacles, Taufik said there should be no reason the Malaysia talks would not result in a political settlement.

Asked if Kuala Lumpur considered the rebellion as a threat to Malaysian security, Taufik said: "Yes it will (threaten security), obviously it will."

"We want peace and stability in Mindanao not only for the Philippines but for Southeast Asia."

The region is now "the center, the bedrock of terrorism," he said.

"We can't deny that we have a very serious problem here. We can't deny the networking among them and their relations with other terrorist groups in other parts of the world."

He also said the areas adjacent to Mindanao, including Brunei and east Malaysia, are "not growing as well as we wanted it, basically because of the problem in the southern Philippines."

Malaysia has blamed the rebellion for the serious problem of illegal migrants and crime in Sabah state.

The MILF has rejected allegations it provided training sites at its Mindanao camps for the Jemaah Islamiyah, blamed for a series of bombings in the region including the Bali attack that claimed more than 200 lives last year. — AFP