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Manila-Talks

DELAY IN KL TALKS RISKS SHOOTING WAR IN MINDANAO

By: Al Labita Jr

MANILA, Nov 19 (Bernama) -- The prolonged delay in resuming the peace talks in Malaysia is worrisome and could trigger a renewed shooting war between the Government and Muslim separatists in Mindanao.

Philippine opposition leaders raised this fear today amidst reports that the Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have yet to agree on whether or not to resume their talks in Kuala Lumpur.

"The more the peace talks remain at a standstill, the greater is the risk of a shooting war. And if that happens, we will be back to square one," Opposition Senator Aquilino Pimentel warned.

Officials handling the talks blamed the delay on the MILF's indecision on who to designate as its chief peace negotiator due to organisational changes following the recent death of its chairman, Hashim Salamat.

They also attributed it to the change of Prime Ministers in Malaysia, from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, which required some adjustments as hosts of the peace talks.

Pimentel, who hails from Mindanao, demanded nonetheless that President Gloria Arroyo's Government should explain why formal peace negotiations had not reopened in Kuala Lumpur.

"So much precious time has been squandered. Government and MILF representatives should now go back to the negotiating table to resolve the remaining contentious issues and hammer out a final peace pact," he said.

He noted that both sides signed a mutual ceasefire last July 14 and reaffirmed their commitment to pursue the search for peace.

The opposition leader's statement coincided with reports of new tensions building up in the Southern Philippines as the military and the MILF had started swapping charges on alleged violations of the ceasefire and other agreements previously forged.

The military had accused the MILF of taking advantage of the protracted lull in the peace talks to recruit more combatants, stock up arms and later launch provocative attacks against the military.

The MILF also alleged that the Government had reneged on a previous agreement to pull out its Army troops from the Buliok complex, the former rebel command base between North Cotabato and Maguindanao Provinces.

Pimentel said the inordinate delay in the peace talks was unjustified, pointing out that what was expected in Kuala Lumpur was just a continuation of the exploratory talks. The peace talks in Kuala Lumpur were originally scheduled to resume last July but have been postponed several times.

Pimentel also noted that a ceasefire monitoring team from Malaysia and some other Islamic countries had not been deployed up to now.

He voiced the hope that newly-installed Datuk Seri Abdullah would honour the commitment of former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir, to broker the peace talks.

Pimentel also urged the Arroyo Government to take advantage of the United States' offer to actively mediate the conflict if only to fast-track the peace negotiations, which had been going on since 1997.

He disclosed that the Washington-based US Institute of Peace would be sending a team to Manila in the next few days to reiterate their offer to play an active role in the peace talks.

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