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Philippines-Peace

P'PPINE-MILF PEACE PROCESS IN FINAL STAGE - DE VENECIA

KUALA LUMPUR, July 25 (Bernama) -- The peace process in the Philippines has matured for final settlement to end an almost three decades of separatist Muslim rebels fight against the government in Mindanao, southern Philippines.

Speaker of the Philippines Parliament Jose de Venecia said this had been made possible with the active and dynamic role played by Malaysia and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) countries, especially Indonesia and Libya, in the peace negotiations.

The peace process is supported by the United States, he said.

de Venecia said the Philippines Government and the congress were also putting together a significant economic and social packages to support the peace plan between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

"We hope with the good help and active role of Malaysia, OIC countries and the United States, as third party facilitators, we can finally put this agreement to a settlement.

"We believe, we are now moving into the final stage," he told reporters after meeting Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tun Dr Mohamed Zahir Ismail at Parliament building here today.

de Venecia is heading a seven-member delegation on a 10-hour visit to Malaysia. Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process, Eduardo R. Ermita, is also in the delegation.

The 12,500-strong MILF has been fighting for an independent Islamic state in southern Philippines since 1978.

The Philippine Government put on hold peace talks with the MILF, to be hosted by Malaysia, following an attack on Siocon town in Mindanao in early May, resulting in 34 deaths. Manila blamed the MILF for the attack.

On July 19, both parties declared cessation of hostilities to make way for the peace talks.

de Venecia said the dates for the peace talks would be determined by the Malaysian Government.

de Venecia thanked the Malaysian Government and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the role played by Kuala Lumpur to help find a lasting peace in the Philippines.

Ermita told reporters that Manila was confident the peace talks would proceed smoothly with the assistance of Malaysia and cessation of hostilities.

"... we should be able to achieve an agreement sooner than later. Our confidence is based on the assistance by the Malaysian Government," he said.

He said Manila had also asked Malaysia to monitor the ceasefire between the government and the MILF.

On a different matter, de Venecia said his country had proposed for the setting up of an Asean Anti-Poverty Fund to help the poor in the region.

He also invited Dr Mohamed Zahir to attend the Asian Parliament for Peace Conference in Manila next month.

On his discussions with de Venecia, Dr Mohamed Zahir said they talked about the proposal to set up an Asean Parliament.

Describing the proposal as a "good idea", he said, Asean countries could work together to enact common laws to facilitate travels and law enforcement, among others.

For instance, Asean countries already have similar laws for drug trafficking, he said.

"We are toying with the idea. We are still talking because there are still some Asean countries without a Parliament," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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