

Philippines says Malaysia to remain peace broker
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Philippine President Benigno Aquino said on Tuesday that Malaysia would be kept as the main broker in peace talks with Muslim separatist rebels.

"We are supposed to be at the last stop, at the advanced stage of the negotiations. Changing the third party (broker) at this point might derail the attainment of a comprehensive agreement," Aquino told reporters.

The statement came after the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief negotiator, Mohagher Iqbal, said he received information that the government may replace Malaysia with Indonesia as the host and broker of the talks.

Iqbal did not say where he received the information but said if that were to happen, the talks expected to resume next month could be in jeopardy.

"That is a welcome statement, it bolsters our confidence that the other side means business," Iqbal told AFP Tuesday, reacting to Aquino's comment.

"There is no reason to replace Malaysia as the facilitator. They have the institutional memory about the past negotiations."

The government has said the peace talks would resume after Ramadan, which ends in the Philippines on September 10.

Aiming for peace

The MILF has been waging a rebellion since 1978 for the creation of an independent Islamic state on the southern island of Mindanao, and more than 150,000 people have died in the fighting.

It signed a truce with Manila in 2003 to pave the way for peace talks, abandoning its ultimate goal and settle for the highest form of autonomy.

But then-president Gloria Arroyo failed to secure a peace deal with the MILF by the time she stepped down in June this year.

Negotiations with her government collapsed in 2008 when the MILF launched attacks across Mindanao after the Supreme Court said a proposed deal giving them control over large areas in the south was unconstitutional.

Nearly 400 people were killed in those clashes.

Both sides signed a fresh ceasefire last year, but the MILF opted to wait for Arroyo's successor for further negotiations.

Aquino, who won the presidency in May by a landslide, has said he is aiming for a peace deal with the rebel group during his six-year term.

- AFP

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