

Some 200 Muslim religious leaders have formed the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines (NUCP) as a vehicle for uniting thousands of Islamic scholars in the country. The participants also signed an open letter to President Barack H. Obama. (***Editor's Note: The contents of the open letter to President Obama are reproduced at the end of this article. This website has also forwarded the NUCP letter to President Obama through the Office of the Press Secretary at the White House*** .)

Hamid Barra from Marawi City was elected vice-chairperson of the 15-member NUCP interim board during the Jan. 26-29, 2009, Second National Summit of Ulama in the Philippines. The summit was held in Quezon City, northeast of Manila.

He serves as Muslim convener for the Bishops-Ulama Conference, an interreligious dialogue group started in 1996 as a forum for Christian and Muslim religious leaders to contribute to peace and development in Mindanao, the southern Philippine region.

Barra, along with Aboulkhair Tarason of Basilan and Professor Moner Bajunaid of General Santos City, respectively NUCP chairman and secretary general, led the board in taking their oath of office during the closing dinner on January 29. Former Philippine President Fidel Ramos and British Ambassador Peter Beckingham witnessed the oath.

The 15-member board will implement plans aimed at empowering Muslim religious scholars to lead Muslim communities in working for peace and development, explained Amina Rasul in her

welcoming remarks.

Ms. Rasul, lead convener of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, which organized the summit, reported 217 ulama from 116 local organizations based in 24 provinces and cities attended. Trained in Islam and Islamic law, ulama interpret Islam's sciences, doctrines and laws.

Thirty aleemat, or female Islamic scholars, also participated.

"We, the ordinary members of the ummah (Muslim community as a whole), have been waiting for our ulama and our aleemat to unite" and lead Muslim communities in reforming Islam as well as in working for peace and community development, Ms. Rasul said.

The summit's theme was "One message, one ummah."

Ustadz Shariff Julabbi, Ulama League of the Philippines vice president, said the keynote

address highlighted for him that moderation is a challenge among Muslims in various countries.

Endang Turmudi, secretary general of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, awakening of Islamic scholars), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, gave the address, titled Islam and the Challenges of the Modern World.

He stressed that globalization requires Muslims worldwide "to review and put in an appropriate way" their relationship with fellow Muslims and with people of other religions. The need "to strike a balance between grasping our belief and tolerating others," he said, is seen even among Muslims in the diversity of Islamic ideological groups.

According to the scholar, "Violence by Muslims is not derived from the doctrine of Islam but from certain interpretations affected by the political situations surrounding them." NU, with some 40 million members, has been attacked because of its "moderate" stance, he added.

Julabbi said privately that challenges to unity among the Moro people, Philippine Muslims, include "tribalism" and distrust.

The Philippine scholar also said Moro Islamic Liberation Front members also have told him they oppose uniting ulama and "allowing them to be used" by governments through development ventures.

The embassies of Britain and the Netherlands sponsored the summit. Ambassador Robert Brinks of the Netherlands stressed at the opening dinner the importance of the "unified voice of a minority group" to guard against injustice.

The Dutch diplomat cautioned that in the Philippines, where the 2007 census showed 81-percent of the 88.57-million population were Catholics, the loose organization of the Muslim community will not impress the government. Additionally, the donor community "in general is more inclined to deal with well-established organizations," he told the religious leaders.

According to government estimates, 80-percent of the country's 5-million Muslims live in Mindanao.

Abdullah Saeed, professor of Arab and Islamic studies at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, and Hisham Hellyer, principal research fellow at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies in Malaysia, lectured on Islam and modernity.

Ulama and aleemat joined workshops that included discussion of electoral reforms with Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting chairperson Henrietta de Villa.

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The Second National Summit of Ulama in the Philippines

Quezon City, Philippines

January 26 to 29, 2009

AN OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA

January 29, 2009

HIS EXCELLENCY

PRESIDENT BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA

Washington, D.C.

United States of America

Dear Mr. President:

Greetings of peace and goodwill.

We, the undersigned participants to the 2nd National Ulama Summit in the Philippines, held on January 26 to 29, 2009 at the Imperial Palace Suites, Quezon City, Philippines, send our heartfelt congratulations and felicitations to Your Excellency for having been sworn into office as the first American President with personal ties to the Islamic world, Asia and Africa.

We take note of Your Excellency's inaugural address on January 20, 2009. We express our deep appreciation to your statement assuring the Muslim world of a "new way forward, based on mutual respect and mutual interest." We also take note with interest of Your Excellency's description of America as "a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity." And so in the spirit of your recent pronouncement that "America will start by listening, not dictating," the Muslims in the Philippines, with equal vigor and commitment to peace and the dignity of humanity, hereby reach out across the ocean to take your outstretched hand and seek to renew and strengthen our friendship with America and the American people.

On this momentous occasion, we make the following appeal to Your Excellency, with goodwill and universal peace as our primary aim:

1.0 To engage the Muslim world, particularly the ulama sector, through dialogue and cooperation that will benefit our communities and humanity.

2.0 To address the root cause of the problem in the Middle East by recognizing the right

of the Palestinians to their homeland and a state of their own;

3.0 To vigorously support the peace process in Mindanao to end the 40-year armed conflict which has resulted in 600,000 displaced and hundreds killed since August 2008, and work to bring the Government of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) back to the negotiating table as soon as possible;

4.0 To support the legitimate and inherent right of the Bangsamoro people to self-determination.

5.0 To support the full implementation of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine government. And

6.0 To extend massive relief and rehabilitation assistance to internally displaced persons in Mindanao, particularly in conflict-affected areas, through socio-economic development programs that will bring prosperity and dignity to our people.

In conclusion, we heard you loud and clear when you told the Muslim world: "Americans are not your enemy." Mr. President, with respect and a conviction to improve relations between Muslims and the west, we also say to you, "the Muslims are not your enemy."

We reiterate our felicitations and congratulations to Your Excellency. Please accept our highest regard and good wishes to the First Family and to the American people.

Filipino-Muslim Religious Leaders Create United National Body and Send Letter to President Obama - Ma

Written by Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy Press Office

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Thank you, Mr. President, and Godspeed.

Very respectfully yours,

(Original Signed)

Aboulkhair Tarason

Chairman, NUCP

(Original Signed)

Hamid Barra

Vice-chairperson, NUCP Interim Board, and

Muslim convener for the Bishops-Ulama Conference of the Philippines

(Original Signed)

Professor Moner Bajunaid

Secretary General, NUCP

(Original Signed)

Amina Rasul

Chairperson, Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy

(Original Signed)

Ustadz Shariff Julabbi

Vice President, Ulama League of the Philippines

(Original Signed)

Other Delegates