

Indonesia today reiterated its full support for the success of the full implementation of the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed in 1996.

The call was made by Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Rezlan Ishar Jenie at the opening of the 3rd Tripartite Meeting of the Government Peace Panel (GRP), the MNLF and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) here this afternoon.

“Indonesia stands ready to shoulder its part,” Jenie said as he appealed

“for the OIC members to be forthcoming in supporting economic development of the region (Mindanao).”

Jenie is presiding officer at the three-day session as chair of the OIC-Peace Committee in Southern Philippines.

The conference tackles the full implementation of the GRP-MNLF peace process signed in

Malacanang Palace on September 2, 1996, ending 25 years of warfare in Mindanao.

The first two tripartite meetings were held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and Istanbul, Turkey.

This is the first time the Philippines is holding the conference.

``It has been exactly one year since the Istanbul Meeting, where we decided to extend the mandate of the five Working Groups to enable them to come up with concrete recommendations,`` Jenie said in his opening remarks.

``We are now meeting here to consider the outcomes of the Joint Working Groups; to push for implementation of those already agreed between the parties, and identify the challenges with a view to find a way to move forward the peace process,`` Jenie added.

He stressed that ``the main objective of this meeting is to ensure effective and full implementation of the peace process.``

Jenie said this is now the chance to move forward the peace process, saying ``we should not let this momentum slip away from our grasp.``

``We must succeed in answering our duties as leaders in our respective fields and regions, and to go beyond our differences, to focus our combined energies to strive for our common goal: the establishment of peace and development in Southern Philippines,`` he said.

Jenie cited the importance of establishing peace and development in Mindanao. ``The urgency today, is for everyone to find the courage, give substance to our peace process. Courage has been shown by the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1996. Nevertheless, further steps are still needed,`` he said.

Jenie also said that ``the time for action...is now.``

``The attempts to secure sustainable peace will not be an easy task, but I believe that, with strong political will, together we can,`` Jenie concluded. (PNA) # # #

* GRP-MNLF-OIC review implementation of 1996 Final Peace Agreement

MANILA (PNA) -- The three-day third session of the tripartite talks among the government of the Philippines (GRP), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) opened this afternoon in Manila with all three heads of delegations acknowledging that the Filipino people have been waiting ``far too long`` for peace to descend

in Mindanao.

The current session convenes to evaluate the results of the joint working group meetings between the GRP and the MNLF which are being facilitated by the OIC-Peace Committee of Southern Philippines, also known as the Committee of 12 (C12).

The Committee of 12 is led by Indonesia. The first two sessions were held in Jeddah and Istanbul respectively.

At least five key issues are bones of contention in the protracted sessions of the GRP and MNLF, revolving mainly on the review of how the 1996 Final Peace Agreement has been implemented.

The issues include the integration of Muslims in mainstream government, the Shari`ah law and the judiciary, education and economic development.

Among others, the Agreement led to the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), with Nur Misuari as the first governor.

But GRP panel head Nabil Tan emphasized in his opening statement that ``a review is not a renegotiation but a review of how implementation has fared.'' His point of view was shared by Special Envoy Sayed El-Masry of Egypt, who represents the OIC Secretary-General.

``The Bangsamoro has been looking at us for many years to help them out,`` Masry said, as he reiterated appreciation for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo for her laudable efforts in achieving peace in Mindanao..

The 200-strong MNLF delegation was headed by its chairman, the irrepressible Misuari, who lamented the slowness of the implementation process and noted that it has been 33 years since the first Agreement was brokered by Libya, 13 years since the 1996 version in Indonesia and four years since the tripartite talks were first broached in Sanna, Yemen.

In his trademark fiery line, Misuari lambasted what he called as ``platitudes after platitudes on peace`` and appealed that his listeners ``search (their) conscience, to make a resolution to break the cycle of terror and war in our homeland.``

In so many words, and in his usual exasperated mode, Misuari declared that the current sessions ``is our last chance, and if we don't succeed in peace talks, we have no choice but to, probably return to our (MNLF) message of independence.``

Ambassador Masry and two other members of the OIC C12 reacted and said ``that's Misuari as he is ?? we've heard that before.``

The OIC C12, which handles the Mindanao problem and led by Indonesia, includes Turkey, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Libya, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, Brunei, Bangladesh, Senegal, Pakistan and Somalia.

Other high-profile MNLF members at the sessions included former ARMM Gov. Hussein Parouk, who is the MNLF's Foreign Affairs Secretary, and Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema.

Parouk noted that peace talks ``can't go on forever, but a review of the Agreement`` is vital. Even during his time as ARMM governor, Parouk had vigorously espoused putting Muslims in key government institutions such as the Supreme Court.

``Definitely, there is a Muslim who is qualified to be there (SC), as much as there have already been Muslim associate justices in the Court of Appeals and the Commission on Elections,`` he told the Philippines News Agency at the sidelines of the session.

``We need to review an issue in the Shari`ah law and justice system for Muslims,`` he said. He referred apparently to the stringent requirement that admission to the Shari`ah Bar is predicated with membership in the secular and mainstream Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP).

In his opening statement, Masry pointed to the urgency of getting real deals in the current sessions. ``In front of us is a real clue to move forward and let not the momentum slip away from our grasp.``

There is ``urgency for everyone to find the courage to put substance in to the peace process,`` Masry emphasized. ``The time is now ?? and I appeal to the OIC to be steadfast in their commitment.`` ###

* Japan commits funding support for three projects

Davao City -- The Government of Japan, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), committed to provide funding support for three projects during High-Level Consultations on Yen Loan Assistance with the Philippine government at the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Boardroom, Pasig City.

Representing the two countries were NEDA Deputy Director-General Rolando G. Tungpalan and Japan MOFA Director of Loan Aid Division, International Cooperation Bureau Takashi Miyahara.

The projects are: Forestland Management Form of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) costing some PhP4.52 billion; the Support Program for Agri-Enterprise

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Development (SPAED) of the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) worth some PhP9.6 billion; and the Logistics Infrastructure Assistance Facility (LINAFA) amounting to about PhP16 billion.

ProFORM is a 10-year project that aims to rehabilitate degraded economic conditions of affected communities in the three critical river basins in the Cordillera Administrative Region, Cagayan Valley (Region 2), Central Luzon (Region 3) and Western Visayas (Region 6).

The project aims to strengthen forestland management and improve the socioeconomic conditions and the quality of life of upland dwellers. ProFORM covers survey and mapping and forest land use planning, community organizing, site development (reforestation, agroforestry, silvopasture and enterprise development), agroforestry support facilities, policy initiatives, monitoring and evaluation, and project management. Of the total project amount, around PhP3.56 billion will be funded by JICA loan and government will counterpart PhP956.24 million.

The SPAED aims to spur economic growth and improve living conditions by providing new job opportunities and increasing the level of investments, particularly in the private sector and to make available short, medium and long term funds to address the credit needs of key players in the agricultural sector.

The project will mostly augment the existing fund supply of LBP to address the credit gaps of three priority sectors related to agriculture (small farmers and fisher folks, small and medium scale enterprises and anchor firms/agribusiness enterprises) and direct lending and conduits, as well as project management and enhancement of information technology and human resources. To be implemented over five years, around PhP7.70 billion will be funded by loan and the rest will be the government counterpart.

Meanwhile, the LINAFA aims to improve infrastructure which directly impact on prices of basic commodities; stimulate economic activity thru sea links between islands and regions; provide greater mobility for commuters, open up new markets for agricultural products and tourism and raise standards of logistics and distribution system to make the country competitive globally.

The project covers the provision of Roll-On Roll-Off vessels, roads, packaging transport and distribution facilities, bulk and cold chain and municipal markets. (NEDA-PIA XI) # # #

* Economic advisers present measures to counter crisis

Davao City -- Economic managers presented yesterday at the Marc Polo Hotel, Davao City the various measures taken by the Philippine government to sustain economic growth in the midst of the global financial crisis.

They, too, urged the local business community to realize government efforts and how these measures have been contributing to the country's resiliency to the crisis.

Present in the economic briefing are Department of Finance secretary Gary Teves, National Economic and Development Authority secretary Ralph Recto, Department of Budget and Management secretary Rolando Andaya, Department of Trade and Industry undersecretary Merly Cruz, Department of Agriculture undersecretary Segfredo Serrano, Department of Energy Undersecretary Datu Zamzamin Ampatuan.

Teves explained the shift of government fiscal policy by investing into infrastructure and social service sectors to ensure that the economy remains buoyant.

``The crisis calls for our adjustment of policy that is why we have this Economic Resiliency Plan (ERP),`` he said.

Instead of focusing on the country's interest payments, bulk of the budget will rather be poured on the ERP.

The ERP, according to Recto, is designed through better revenue collection, enhancement of cash liquidity, access to credit and low interest rates, and more effective spending.

The government has now focused its investment on infrastructure development. This includes construction, repair, rehabilitation of irrigation, and construction of local roads.

However, to ensure effective spending, Recto advised agencies to closely monitor the implementation of projects in the local level.

DBM has already frontloaded 60 percent of its infrastructure development budget for the first half of the year.

``This brings the frontloaded infrastructure program to P100 billion, more than 200% higher than the P33 billion in 2008,`` Andaya said.

DBM prioritizes infrastructure projects like Surigao-Davao Coastal Road rehabilitation, Kapalong-Talaingod-Valencia Road, and the reconstruction of Baganga Bridge and approaches along Davao Oriental-Surigao del Sur Coastal Road.

The ERP is expected to generate more than 800,000 new jobs which is believed to help the government reach the target of 3.7 to 4.4 percent GDP growth for this year. # # #

* US lauds PGMA's efforts to resolve extra-judicial killings

MANILA (PNA) -- Critics and detractors of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo may raise their eyebrows or even raise a raucous dispute, but her efforts to resolve extra-judicial and unexplained killings in the country for the past three years have been gaining substantial grounds.

The latest United States' 2008 country report on human rights situation in the Philippines has reported that there is a substantial decrease in the number of cases of extra-judicial or unexplained killings and disappearances.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita recently announced that the government has picked up the challenge of fighting insurgency, terrorism and criminality without doing away with the adherence to human rights.

"We are pleased that the (US country) report continues to recognize the efforts of the Philippine government that deter the occurrence of unexplained killings. It, in fact, noted the continuing year-by-year dramatic drop in the number of these cases," Ermita said.

According to some non-governmental organizations, the number of extra-judicial killings is at 836. The government, through Task Force Usig, cross-checked the figures and delisted 669 of them.

Since the creation of TF Usig, the group tasked to look into cases of killings involving militant party list and media practitioners, there was an 85 percent decrease of cases in 2007 and 90 percent decrease in 2008.

Ermita said that though there are NGOs and CSOs critical on how the government handles the cases, they consider civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations looking after the cases as partners rather than adversaries.

He noted that some NGOs and CSOs may be averse toward government but still, "a greater number of their colleagues are supportive of government and its plans and programs that bear upon the promotion and protection of human rights.."

This commitment materialized through the formulation of the Second National Human Rights Action Plan in partnership with NGOs by the Presidential Human Rights Committee (PHRC).

"There are always lines to government that are always accessible to these organizations for them to be able to air their concerns and grievances,

rather than going through media," Ermita said.

Among the highlights of the US report include the reiteration that the major perpetrators of human rights violations in the country are lawless groups like the Abu Sayyaf rebels, MILF, and the CPP-NPA.

Also, the report recognized the government's respect for the freedom of assembly, protection of women's rights, and respect for the work of international non-governmental organizations investigating violations of human rights.

To further bring down this number and provide speedy resolution of the cases, Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo recently ordered TF Usig to create a tracker team that will go after suspected killers of media personalities.

She also ordered both the Department of Justice and the Philippine National Police to further intensify efforts to stop violence against media members, an order handed out as she earmarked P2 million pesos as donation to the Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists to help the families of slain journalists.

These efforts show that the government, even though accused numerous times by its critics of tolerating unexplained killings in the country, continues to do its job and does it well. # # #

* RP eligible for large-scale grant --MCC

MANILA (PNA) -- The Philippines has been selected by the Washington-based Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Board of Directors as among the countries eligible for a large-scale grant that can be used as additional source of capital for investment in economic development.

``Congratulations to the Philippine government for its demonstrated commitment to tackling difficult challenges and improving the lives of its people,`` MCC Ambassador John Danilovich said in a statement.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said the MCC statement reaffirms the Arroyo government's commitment in reducing poverty and focus on making the economy grow.

``This grant is a seal of the government's good housekeeping,`` Remonde added.

At present, the Philippines enjoys a threshold program status, which means it is only receiving smaller grants designed to help improve performance on specific indicators.

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With a compact assistance status next year, the Philippines will be eligible for full assistance from the US-based MCC.

Remonde said the MCC chooses its beneficiaries based on the measure of good governance, the country's investment on people and policies that encourage economic freedom.

``Being selected as one of the countries given this means a lot and we should all be happy about it. This will be an additional source of capital for investment in economic development, both in human and infrastructure,`` he said.

Countries selected as eligible for a large-scale grant (compact status) have the opportunity to submit a proposal for five-year program to reduce poverty.

The MCC, a firm that works with among the poorest countries in the world, said the Philippines will be given a compact status starting next year. # # #

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