

GMA hails gov't, MILF breakthrough

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo hailed the efforts of the government peace panel and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for breaking the deadlock in the peace negotiations in their initial agreement over the ancestral domain issue.

Mrs. Arroyo said both sides "are really determined to have peace" in breaking the stalemate on the contentious issue of ancestral domain and self-rule over the Bangsamoro homeland.

She said the efforts would pave the way for a lasting peace in Mindanao.

"When lasting peace reaches Mindanao, this will be immediately followed by swift and equitable progress," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"With lasting peace, there will also be lasting progress," she said.

Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon on Wednesday said they had hammered out long-standing differences on the ancestral domain of local Muslim communities, allowing for the resumption of peace talks with the MILF that were stalled since December 2007.

The deal would expand the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

Esperon made the announcement during the three-day meeting between the Philippine government peace panel (GRP) and the MILF in Kuala Lumpur.

Both sides have finally broken their seven-month deadlock over ancestral domain, which include highly sensitive issues on the size and control over the new autonomous territory, tentatively called the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, and self-rule.

Esperon said negotiators from both sides agreed to meet again on July 24 and announce the date of the formal signing of the memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo and his Malaysian counterpart, Foreign Minister Ras bin Yatim will both sign the accord, Esperon said.

"The equation has changed dramatically," Esperon remarked after he was informed by GRP head Rodolfo Garcia in Kuala Lumpur that the MILF finally agreed.

Observers said the latest agreement does not guarantee the end of a near 40-year conflict that has killed 120,000 people and displaced two million more in Mindanao.

While the government and leaders of the MILF were rejoicing over the deal, Christian and Muslim communities said they had mixed feelings. Many expressed concern that details of the agreement were not yet known.

"The Christian communities are afraid the Muslims would take back their farmlands," said Emmanuel Piñol, vice governor of North Cotabato.

Piñol said several groups would petition the Supreme Court next week to force the government to divulge details of the agreement.

Piñol said some Christian communities were even planning to arm themselves to defend property they had acquired from Muslims in the last 50 to 60 years. — With James Mananghaya, Reuters