

# GMA: RP to seek Blair's assistance in Mindanao peace process

By PAOLO ROMERO

**CLARK ECONOMIC ZONE** – Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Swedish government will soon be helping the Arroyo administration jump-start peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that are currently stalled because of the fierce fighting in Mindanao, President Arroyo said.

During a dinner with Palace and Pampanga-based reporters, Mrs. Arroyo also said government negotiators will

raise the issue of disarmament in possible future talks with the MILF, some of whose commanders have attacked villages and towns in Mindanao, leaving scores of people dead.

She said she proposed the matter of lending his expertise on forging peace with Blair during her visit to London in December last year. At the time, negotiations hit a snag on the issue of ancestral domain.

"We have to invite him (Blair)," Mrs. Arroyo said. "It is

only now that this (helping in talks) is surfacing. I mean it was already there but with what happened now, we have to accelerate surfacing that issue."

She explained that when she met Blair, they talked about negotiations with separatists in the predominantly Catholic Northern Ireland seeking to break away from Great Britain. The talks led to a final peace agreement and eventual disarmament of the separatist fac-

tions and the pullout of British troops from Northern Ireland.

Also to be invited are Swedish officials to help facilitate the government's new tack in raising the issue of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) with MILF and other rebel groups, she said.

The President pointed out that the 1996 peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front did not include DDR, that is why up to now

MNLF members continue to bear arms and troubles arise from time to time.

Sweden has pioneered DDR initiatives in the United Nations and regularly hosts the Stockholm Initiative on DDR.

"DDR must be part of the talking points. This early we must begin to talk about it," she said, noting that the traditional approach in other countries was to talk about disarmament once a final peace agreement is forged.

She said the disarmament was not a precondition for the resumption of talks with the MILF.

At the House of Representatives, Lanao del Norte Rep. Vicente Belmonte Jr. urged the government to suspend peace negotiations with the MILF until its rogue commanders involved in recent atrocities are brought to justice. - Jess Diaz, Sheila Crisostomo, Pia Lee-Brago, Aurea Calica, Christina Mendez