

GMA reiterates commitment to peace talks with MILF

Lapses

President Arroyo reiterated the government's commitment to the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) but said an immediate assumption of the talks could alter the fighting ends in Mindanao.

In her message for the National Peace Concensus Month, Mrs. Arroyo criticized the negotiations with the MILF had to be suspended to allow low-intensity operations against radicalized MILF leaders.

"We have negotiated in good faith with our Muslim brethren to keep the peace these last seven years and to also forge a lasting peace for generations to come," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She said the progress made by the GRP-MILF talks had been derailed by some MILF commanders who led the treacherous attacks on civilians in Central Mindanao that left scores of civilians dead and maimed hundreds of thousands to the first three last month.

The flare up occurred after the Supreme Court blocked the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domains (MOA-AD), a preliminary peace deal that would have allowed the rebel group to rule over an expanded autonomous region in Mindanao.

The MILF said the attacks were staged by some of its leaders who became disgruntled by the slow progress of the peace talks following the SC order.

"That will not stand. Our confidence was shaken by the wanton violence perpetrated by elements of the MILF. We will not negotiate with a gun pointed at our head," the President said.

In response to the attacks, Mrs. Arroyo suspended the peace talks and ordered a military offensive in the mountain for the renegade MILF commanders and their men. She said the peace efforts would now involve the participation of local communities in the region.

Mrs. Arroyo said the peace talks would be centered on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of all armed groups, including the MILF.

The President has dissolved the GRP that made the preliminary deal with the MILF. She also scrapped MOA-AD, citing possible constitutional questions surrounding the deal.

Local officials in Mindanao had sought before the SC to stop the signing of the MOA-AD, claiming they were not consulted.

The petitioners led by North Cotabato Vice Gov. Emmanuel Pineda and Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobongat also pointed out questions surrounding the MOA-AD that could violate the provisions of the Constitution.

They called on the SC to rule over the issue with finality, even after the disbandment of the GRP and the scrapping of the MOA-AD deal with the MILF.

"Even though the peace panel was dissolved, what we are talking was the MOA itself and we don't want the peace negotiation to go on without the peace process being within the ambit of the Constitution. We don't want many provisions that call for in reality for the dismemberment of the Philippines. We don't want that to happen, we don't want that to be in future negotiation. That is why we still believed the Supreme Court should rule on the matter," Lobongat said.

Commitment to peace

Despite the setback, Mrs. Arroyo said the government is committed to pursue peace with the MILF to allow the economic development of Mindanao as the breadbasket of the country.

"We remain committed to the peace process in Mindanao. The government is on the side of peace and needs the support of all Filipinos, Christian and Muslim alike. If this opportunity for peace is to be realized and the country to prosper," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"We are committed to doing everything possible to bring lasting peace to Mindanao and end 30 years of fighting that has killed more than 120,000 people," she added.

In her message, Mrs. Arroyo emphasized the need to restore peace and order in the region with the help of the MILF keeping its renegade elements in check.

"Innocent civilians should not be terrorized for cross-political gain. We can restart the dialogue when the area is secure and our people are safe and responsible elements in the MILF regain control," the President said.

Former President Joseph Estrada, on the other hand, blamed President Arroyo for ignoring the lessons in dealing with the MILF. "The negotiations, ceasefire and peace talks were used only as opportunities and occasion by MILF for regrouping, repositioning of troops, mobilization of resources, arms and personnel and strategic planning for its future attacks. These tactics are still being employed today by the MILF and we should learn from the past," he said.

Estrada said he had engaged the MILF in peace talks during his administrations.

"But they (MILF) made too many demands which made the negotiations drag on. We were negotiating in good faith, but they were not," he said.

By MARYBY

fire were used against the rebels.

He said seven MILF rebels were also killed and nine others were wounded, though Segovia said their bodies were not recovered.

"We ordered an investigation because we do not want civilians to be caught in the crossfire or become collateral damage," Luna told reporters. Segovia said the military has also asked the Red Cross to conduct an independent investigation into the deaths.

Segovia said the military suspects the MILF men "could have brought some civilians with them or took along some members of their families" as they retreated into the vast rambland terrain.

a clash with ground troops nearby.

On the other hand, the AFP ordered the relief of Brig. Gen. March Anthony Supton, commander of the Army's 10th Brigade based in Iligan City. — With

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