

Missed opportunity: No peace deal between Arroyo gov't, MILF

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Notwithstanding the appointment of new members to the government's peace panel, there is almost no chance that the Arroyo government will be able to conclude a peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the last 18 months of its term.

Fr. Eliseo Mercado, a senior policy adviser of the Cotabato-based Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG), said any movement in the GRP-MILF peace process will only be temporary.

"Any peace negotiation or peace pronouncement under the Arroyo administration will simply be ad interim. With 16 months remaining in her term, and with the elections coming in (May) 2010, I believe that any pronouncement of this government, or any negotiation offered by this government will basically be an ad interim arrangement," he said at a recent peace conference sponsored by the Gaston Ortigas Peace Institute.

"The long enduring peace process and the long enduring development of southern Philippines will be beyond the Arroyo administration," Mercado, a government peace negotiator with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), said.

The failure to reach a peace deal with the MILF will be one of the missed opportunities of the Arroyo administration when it bows out in June 2010.

The Ramos administration, at least, could trumpet peace agreements with the MNLF and the military rebels as among its major achievements in its six-year term from 1992 to 1998.

Arroyo, on the other hand, would have failed to reach a peace agreement not just with the MILF but has also not been able to make any significant headway in talks with communist rebels in the past seven years.

Mercado said the Arroyo government no longer has enough social capital or trust to be able to make any

progress in its seven-year peace talks with the MILF.

Role of peace panel

However, Mercado said he believes the MILF will still agree to pursue the peace process with the Arroyo government.

For one, he said the MILF will have to "state its conditions for the resumption" of the peace talks.

Mercado said the naming of new members to the government's peace panel is important since it may help contain skirmishes between government forces and the MILF.

The government appointed last month Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Rafael Seguis as the new chief negotiator. It recently named Agrarian Reform Secretary Nasser Pangandaman, General Santos City Mayor Adelbert Antonino, and Ronald Adamat (representing indigenous groups), and Iligan lawyer-businessman Tomas Cabili Jr. as the new members of the peace panel.

"The reconstitution of the Philippine panel is very, very important for the simple reason that it will give a new life to the real mechanisms for the ceasefire on the ground," he said.

These ceasefire mechanisms are:

- the Coordinating Council on Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH); and,
- the Ad Hoc Joint Advisory Group or the (AHJAG), which addresses issues of criminality and lawlessness on the ground.

"The [peace] panels give life to the CCCH. Without the Philippine peace panel, the CCCH remains in ambiguity," Mercado said.

Rogue commanders

"The term of the AHJAG expired 15 of November. It needs the two peace panels to agree once again to revitalize the AHJAG. And perhaps, that would be the time that they will be able to separate

the issue of peace making and the issue of lawlessness on the ground," he added.

One of the stumbling blocks in the peace talks is the government's insistence on bringing MILF rogue commanders Umbra Kato and Bravo to justice following their attacks to protest the non-signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOAAD) last Aug. 4.

"Commanders Kato, Bravo et al, these issues are recognized by both the MILF as well as the Philippine government as issues of lawlessness and criminality. So the proper forum for addressing the Kato-Bravo questions will belong to the AHJAG. But you need the two panels to be there to strengthen and perhaps to give more life both to the CCCH and the AHJAG," Mercado said.

Although he has given up hope that a peace deal can be reached between the government and the MILF, Mercado said he still thinks that the two sides will be able to maintain the ceasefire or at least minimize the skirmishes.

He said the two sides should focus on working on the ceasefire and on the "rehabilitation of people on the ground."

First item on agenda

Peace advocate UP Prof. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer also stressed the importance of getting the CCCH and the AHJAG back on track.

She said these security mechanisms should be activated as soon as possible so that "we can have functional mechanisms that will address specific cases of hostilities or eruptions of violence."

She said this should be the first item on the agenda of the new government peace panel team.

Coronel-Ferrer expressed fear that armed conflicts may rise if these security mechanisms are not put back in place.