

Reviving peace talks GMA's 'personal commitment'

Reviving the peace process in Mindanao this year is President Arroyo's "personal commitment" even as negotiators have pushed new initiatives to resume talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

In her speech at the *vin d'honneur* or the traditional New Year's toast with members of the diplomatic corps in Malacañang, Mrs. Arroyo also said the government would continue to implement measures to insulate the country from the global economic crisis.

"Closer to home, the economy will be the central focus of our government and advancing the peace process in Mindanao is my personal commitment in 2009," she said.

The President said when she assumed office in 2001, she "inherited a state of all-out war in Mindanao" but since then "we made steady progress towards permanent peace until the setback of August 2008."

She was referring to the attacks by some commanders of the MILF in central Mindanao after both sides failed to sign the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain that the Supreme Court later declared unconstitutional. Sporadic clashes between the rebels and government troops have continued.

"I hope 2009 will be a comeback year for peace, progress and prosperity in Mindanao," she said.

She said the newly reconstituted peace panel, headed by Ambassador Rafael Seguis, has been directed to touch base with Malaysian facilitators and MILF leaders to schedule the resumption of peace talks.

"The panel is poised and ready to embark on substantive discussions, including ceasefire-related issues, the International Monitoring Team (IMT), and accelerated development for Mindanao. We

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hope all parties are as committed as we are to resume negotiations soon," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"Our new paradigm for peace includes inter-faith dialogue, authentic consultation with communities, and the principle of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) for armed rebel groups," she said.

To advance peace and progress in Mindanao, as in the past, she said the Philippines hopes to be able to count on the support of its partners in the IMT - Brunei, Japan and Libya - Malaysia the facilitator, and other nations in the Organization of Islamic Conference, Europe and the US.

Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Secretary Hermogenes Esperon Jr. disclosed that among the new initiatives the government is working on is dividing and expanding the IMT into two groups, one to undertake the usual ceasefire monitoring and the new group would con-

centrate on keeping tabs on development projects in conflict areas.

Esperon said the government is set to hold discussions with the governments of Sweden, the United Kingdom, and possibly Indonesia for the formation of an international group that would be in charge of DDR once peace talks are underway.