

# Hillary hopes for peace pact before GMA term ends

By PIA LEE-BRAGO

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday that the time was ripe for the Philippines to finally seal a peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) with barely six months left in the Arroyo presidency.

Clinton urged both sides to broker an agreement before the end of President Arroyo's term in June next year.

She warned the negotiating environment

could change under a new administration.

"The conditions for peace are ripe. People really want to see it. I hope no one misses this opportunity," Clinton told a nationally televised public forum of the ANC a day after discussing the issue with Mrs. Arroyo and other top officials.

Clinton recommitted her government's support in helping negotiate a deal with the MILF, which has been waging a separatist rebellion in Mindanao since 1978.

Clinton also clarified that US forces in Mindanao were never involved in direct combat operations.

"In respect to the conflict in Mindanao, we have provided training and assistance but not involvement in combat by US

forces. It is a facilitating and support role to fight those who disrupt communities to engage in terrorist activities, but unfortunately the kinds of horrible acts like beheading and kidnapping are so contrary to every religion, contrary to every faith," she said.

In urging quick action for a peace deal with the MILF, Clinton recalled that her husband Bill Clinton was close to sealing a Middle East peace agreement near the end of his time as US president.

But she said then-Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had put this off, thinking he could get a better deal from Bill Clinton's successor. None came.

"So strike while the iron is hot, when people are in the mood and willing to make peace. Do not sleep, do not rest until we finally get there," Clinton told a crowd of students at the University of Santo Tomas during the televised

forum.

Clinton said she believed Mrs. Arroyo was "fully prepared" to make the difficult decisions necessary to achieve peace with the MILF.

"What I have often found is that it is easier to make these difficult decisions when you are on the way out of office. Because you know what is at stake and you are willing to leave the political fires," she said.

The Philippine government and the MILF signed a new ceasefire in July. 11 months after long-running peace talks were derailed by a series of deadly guerrilla attacks in Central Mindanao.

The attacks came after the Supreme Court rejected a planned deal that would have given the MILF political and economic control over 700 territories it claims as its ancestral domain.

Both sides have said in recent months that peace talks could resume soon, but this has not materialized.

"You cannot have a peace agreement that gives one group of people more rights than other groups of people within in your country," Clinton said.

"That would be creating more problems, so whatever is worked out within the political framework has to be respectful of the constitutional and legal requirements of the nation," she said.

In dealing with terrorists operating in countries like the Philippines and Afghanistan, Clinton said the most important lesson the US learned is that the people themselves should be willing to stand up against terrorism.

"People have to be given support to stand against it (terrorism) and that's really what counterinsurgency and counterterrorism is about," Clinton said.

"The most common comment we hear from around the country from people (in) we want your help to enable us to defend ourselves and once we can, we want you to leave. That is exactly what we want," Clinton said.

Clinton said the US would continue to provide support "appropriate in partnership and in pursuit of the friendship that we feel for the people of the Philippines."

- WITH AP