



US envoy visits MILF camp



SULTAN KUDARAT, Shariff Kabunsuan (Wednesday, February 20, 2008)- US Ambassador Kristie Kenney yesterday visited the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) stronghold in an attempt to re-open stalled peace talks between the government and the rebels' group.

Kenney huddled briefly with key members of the MILF central committee, but told reporters that her coming to Camp Darapanan, now the MILF's central headquarters, was a "private visit."

She was greeted by MILF fighters in combat uniform and armed with M-16 rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. She met with MILF chief Muhammad Murad behind closed doors for about an hour before leaving.

Kenney, who has toured Central Mindanao the past [US/p.11]

HISTORIC --- US Ambassador Kristie Kenney and MILF Chairman Al-Haj Murad emerge from the MILF's liaison center after a brief meeting during the envoy's visit to Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat town in Shariff Kabunsuan last February 19. []

Ceasefire violations almost zero, says Malaysian general

ZAMBOANGA CITY (Friday, February 8, 2008) - Almost nil.

Thus said Malaysian Maj. Gen. Datuk Mat Yasin bin Daud, head of the International Monitoring Team (IMT), of ceasefire violations by either the military or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Skirmishes that could threaten the ceasefire between the two "have gone down very drastically," said Daud, who heads the fourth batch of the Malaysian-led IMT.

Malaysia is brokering the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF.

Yasin, together with other foreign observers from Brunei, Indonesia, Libya, and Malaysia that comprise the IMT, and the heads of the government-MILF joint ceasefire committee (JCC) paid a courtesy call on Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat the other day.

Yasin reported that before the ceasefire took effect, hostilities and encounters between military and MILF forces numbered 698.

[CEASEFIRE/p. 11]

Walkout threat mars Istanbul talks

Inclusion of ARMM Organic Act becomes thorny issue in talks

The government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which have been at odds over the implementation of the final peace agreement (FPA), have renewed their adherence to the "primacy" of the landmark accord signed on Sept. 2, 1996.

The 57-member Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) has asked the two sides, which met in Istanbul, Turkey on Feb. 14-16 for the tripartite talks on the review of the FPA, to agree on the need to reconcile the FPA and Republic Act 9054, the amended Organic Act of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

Reached through mobile phone while stranded at the [WALKOUT/p.10]

Supported by:



Institute for
Autonomy and
Governance

MILF has no plan to assassinate GMA

COTABATO CITY (Feb. 19) – The Moro Islamic Liberation

Front has denied insinuations it has a plan to assassinate President Arroyo in the wake of calls for her to resign due to alleged massive corruption in her administration.

“That is not true. That is unbelievable,” the MILF’s chieftain, Al Haj Murad, told reporters, referring to reports purporting they have hatched a plan to assassinate the President.

Murad said the report was meant to discredit the MILF, which has an on-going peace talks with government since 1997.

“It (the report) was meant to discredit and destroy the MILF,” he said. “We are protesting those allegations by ranking security officials of Malacanang.”

Murad said they will not embark on anything that can derail their peace overture with the government.

Murad said the MILF is firm in its position of having the so-called Mindanao Moro uprising resolved through a peaceful negotiation.

“There are people in government who are opposing the GRP-MILF talks and they want to discredit and embarrass us,” Murad said. He did not elaborate, however.

Murad said the stalled GRP-MILF talks may possibly resume in March, but gave no specific details such as tentative dates for the next round of formal talks and how both sides would resolve the impasse on the negotiations triggered by earlier misunderstandings on the modalities of the setting up of a Muslim homeland to be covered by the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity. ()

Looking deeper on constitutional options to Bangsamoro self-determination

On January 16-17, 2008, twenty-nine Manila and Mindanao-based constitutional lawyers and professors, political scientists, MNLF, MILF, and government lawyers, engaged in academic discussions on constitutional issues and options related to the search for sustainable peace and development in Mindanao. An important backdrop to the affair was the “impasse” in the on-going peace negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which is now on its 11th year of on-and-off talks. The roundtable discussion, held at the Marco Polo Hotel, Davao City, was convened by the Institute for Autonomy and Governance and facilitated by Atty. Benedicto Bacani, IAG Executive Director. This monograph, written by Ramon Ma. G. Bernabe, OMI, puts together the main ideas generated during the roundtable discussions.

The participants in the roundtable discussions were (in alphabetical order):

Dr. Jose Abueva (Kalayaan College), Atty. Grace Tillah-Alasco (Western Mindanao State University), Atty. Lanang Ali (MILF Peace Panel), Col. Francis Alaurin (6th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army), Mohamad Zamri Zainal Anuar (Consulate General of Malaysia), Carolyn Arguillas (Mindanews), Atty. Maryann Amado (Mindanao Peoples Caucus), Judge Adoracion Cruz-Avisado (Transformative Justice Institute), Atty. Benedicto Bacani (Institute for Autonomy and Governance), Atty. Edilwasif Baddiri (Young Moro Professionals), Atty. Froebel Kan Balleque (Notre Dame University College of Law), Prof. Ponciano Bennagen, Atty. Musib Buat (MILF Peace Panel), Crisanto Cayon (The Asia Foundation), Atty. Abdul Dataya (MILF Peace Panel), Maj. Gen. Raymundo Ferrer (6th Infantry Division, Philippine Army), Zain Jali, Atty. Ma. Lourdes Juliano (Notre Dame University College of Law), Prof. Abhoud Syed Lingga (Institute of Bangsamoro Studies), Atty. Jose Lorena, Atty. Nasser Marohomsalic (Muslim Legal Assistance Foundation), Atty. Ishak Mastura (Dept. of Trade and Industry—ARMM), Atty. Michael Mastura (MILF Peace Panel), Atty. Camilo Montesa, Atty. Randolph Parcasio (Bangsamoro Law Network), Prof. Rudy Rodil (GRP Peace Panel), Atty. Naguib Sinarimbo (Dept. of Interior and Local Government—ARMM), Ryan Sullivan (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process), and Dean Raul Villanueva (Xavier University College of Law).

Ramon Ma. G. Bernabe, OMI

Exploring Constitutional Options for Bangsamoro Self-determination

Just when many people were talking of a breakthrough in the ongoing peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), leading to high expectations of signing a peace agreement in early 2008, the talks were put on hold when the MILF peace panel declined to meet their counterparts in the GRP panel at the scheduled talks last December 15-17, 2007 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The bone of contention was an “unacceptable” draft memorandum of agreement prepared by the government panel, which did not express what the MILF thought were the consensus points already agreed upon earlier.

More specifically, the blame was put on the government panel’s use of the phrase “constitutional processes” in the draft memorandum. The MILF has consistently said that it does not recognize the Philippine Constitution as frame of reference in the conduct of the peace talks and in the implementation of a comprehensive peace pact or accord that may be eventually reached by the parties.

At the same time, Atty. Musib Buat wrote in a paper that the MILF is said to be not entirely adverse to the use of the phrase “constitutional

[LOOKING /p.5

EDITORIAL BOARD

BGen Rey Sealana AFP
Chief Executive Officer

Von al Haq
Chief Editor

Capt Carlos T Sol Jr PA
Rashid Ladiasan
Associate Editors

Editors: **LTC Joselito R Tocaldo PA**
Geraldine So
Josan Pacaldo

Rodolfo C. Garcia
Mohagher Iqbal
Counselors

Technical Staff:

Danny Pillo	Bobette Dimaukom
Philip Villamar	Sammy Usop
Daniel Villazor	Toks Upam
Voi Flauta	Jonnell Develos
Ricahard Bedua	Dong Gag-uman
Roniie Veñarta	Esmael Lucas

The publication of this newsletter is made possible through the technical and financial assistance provided by the Institute for Autonomy and Governance and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. The IAG is at the Alumni Center, Notre Dame University, Cotabato City and the KAS is at ALPAP 1 Building, 140 Leviste Street, Salcedo Village, Makati City.

New House Speaker should focus on Mindanao – local sectors

COTABATO CITY (Feb. 5) — Peace advocates and officials of non-government organization involved in various peace-building activities are optimistic newly-installed Speaker Prospero Nograles, as a Mindanaon himself, will focus utmost attention on the government's peace overtures with Southern Moro communities.

Many of Central Mindanao's peace advocates said they have not seen in ousted Speaker Jose De Venecia any keen interest in flexing his authority and influence to hasten the Mindanao peace process.

Key members of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) congregation, which has been operating various humanitarian projects in Muslim areas since the 1940s, are convinced Nograles, who hails from Davao City, would reach out to his underprivileged and impoverished Moro neighbors in the South.

"We are hoping that being a Mindanaon, Speaker Nograles will advance the cause of peace process between the government and the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) to end the conflict in Mindanao before the term of President Arroyo ends in 2010," said Oblate priest Bert Layson, who is active in helping resolve security problems in Moro-dominated areas.

Layson, director of the OMI's Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives, said Nograles should, as the country's third highest elected official now, devote enough time in the legislation of measures that can foster religious and political solidarity among the culturally-diverse sectors in the South.

Peace talks between the government and the MILF started January 7, 1997, but gained headway only in 2003 with the help of Malaysia as "third party mediator."

Even the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), with signed a peace pact with Philippine government on September 2, 1996, is confident Nograles will use his being speaker of the House of Representatives as a "springboard" for the legislature's "mandatory" support to effort of fostering peace and sustainable development in Mindanao.

"We are hoping that it would not be difficult for Speaker Nograles to listen to the voices of his Muslim brothers and sister yearning for peace and development in their homeland," said Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, who is the secretary-general of the MNLF.

Some officials of various NGOs involved in peace advocacy thrusts in Moro communities are elated too with the assumption of Nograles as speaker of the House of Representatives.

"Having a Mindanaon as speaker of a very important institution in the country is a source of pride and honor. We are hoping we would now have a thundering voice in the law-making body of the land,"

[NEW/p.8]

Transparency sought in GRP-MNLF-OIC initiative

COTABATO CITY (Feb.18) — — The Moro National Liberation Front wants the tripartite effort to reconcile the GRP-MNLF final peace pact with the charter of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao done in utmost transparency and with the active involvement of Muslim communities in the South.

The government and the MNLF agreed to attune the 11-year-old truce to the R.A. 9054, which is the constitutional basis for the existence of the autonomous region, during the February 14-16 second tripartite meeting in Istanbul, Turkey.

Spearheading the three-way effort of addressing the government and the front's misunderstandings on the implementation of the Sept. 2, 1996 GRP-MNLF peace accord is the Organization of Islamic Conference, a pan-Islamic block of 57 Muslim states, including oil-rich Arab nations in the Middle East.

Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, who is the MNLF's secretary-general, said the OIC's mandate for them and the government to focus on possible amendments to the R.A. 9054 to complement what seems to be weak provisions of the peace pact is "sensible," but needs the involvement of more experts on socio-economic development of impoverished Mindanao Muslim sectors.

"We appreciate the OIC's resolve to help address the misunderstandings on the peace agreement. We are hoping the MNLF and the government can lay all the cards on the table for this tripartite effort to succeed," Sema said, referring to the on-going evaluation by the government, the front, and the OIC of perceived kinks in the truce.

The OIC has called on both the government and the MNLF to speedily "reconcile" GRP-MNLF truce and the R.A. 9054 to hasten the Mindanao peace process.

At the same time, the OIC, during the culmination of the February 14-16 second tripartite meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, also urged both sides to focus on joint initiatives that could hasten the socio-economic empowerment of communities in areas covered by the truce as a capability-building measure to complement each other's continuing bilateral peace overture.

ARMM Speaker Paisalin Tago, who represented the ARMM to the Istanbul tripartite meeting, said the OIC has also emphasized the necessity to make the GRP-MNLF truce and R.A. 9054 attuned to each other for lasting peace and sustainable development to take off in Southern Moro communities.

The R.A. 9054, is also known as the "legal foundation" of the ARMM, which has an executive department, presently led by Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan, who

[TRANSPARENCY/p.7]

5,000 Muslims, Christians hold rally In Southern Philippines

BASILAN, Philippines (Mindanao Examiner / Feb. 07, 2008) - Over 5,000 demonstrators in Basilan island warned Thursday that in the event the derailed peace talks between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) breaks down, its 'bloody ramifications' would be felt not only in Mindanao but also in the whole country.

Conflict could also spill over to Luzon and Visayas should the peace talks totally collapsed.

"The Bangsamoro is asserting its rights because of injustice," said Ustadz John Ausal, MILF spokesperson in Basilan. "If the peace talks will be broken and the negotiations will stop, I am ninety-nine percent sure that war will start again."

"If there is no peace in Mindanao, then there will be no peace in Visayas and Luzon as well," said Hadji Hamid Salahuddin, the local leader of the rebel group.

The protesters gathered at Datu Dizal Cultural Center in Lamitan City to push the government and the MILF into resuming the peace talks, which has been stalled for nearly two months already.

"I doubt it if the government is sincere in negotiating on ancestral domain. Even during our time (GRP-MNLF peace talks), niloloko lang kami ng GRP (they are fooling us already)," Salahuddin said.

Sammy Maulana, secretary-general of Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, a network of 164 Moro non-government and people's organizations, urged the government and MILF peace panels into returning to the negotiating table immediately but lambasted the former for "not abiding with what have been previously agreed by the two parties."

"While some say that the voice of the government can be considered as the voice of God, it only holds true if that government is pro-people. But the actions of this (Philippine) government show that it is anti-people. Therefore, the Bangsamoro people must voice out, because it is truer that the voice of the people is the voice of God," Maulana said.

The GRP-MILF peace talks have been derailed when the MILF negotiating panel boycotted the 15th Exploratory Talks last December 15 to 17, 2007 in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia because the government

[5,000/p.7

AFP: US troops not involved in Sulu clash

(Saturday, February 9, 2008) - Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief Gen. Hermogenes Esperon Jr. yesterday debunked allegations that US troops took part in last Monday's clash between government forces and suspected Abu Sayyaf bandits in Maimbung, Sulu that left eight civilians dead.

In an interview at Camp Aguinaldo, Esperon said the operation was purely planned and executed by Filipino soldiers, particularly the Navy's elite Special Warfare Group and the US-trained Light Reaction Battalion of the Army.

"There were reports that American forces were there during the encounter in Maimbung, Sulu. I deny that because it is not true. Those who conducted the operation were Filipino troops, all under Filipino commanders, planned by Filipinos, planned by the Joint Task Force Comet," he said.

Esperon added that those who are making such claims could have some other interests or motives.

Lt. Col. Bartolome Bacarro, AFP public information chief, said in a separate interview that US forces in Sulu are limited to providing technical intelligence to the AFP.

"They are not engaged, and they could not participate in actual combat operations," he said.

Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro is flying to Sulu today to meet with military commanders in the area and to personally look into the incident.

Teodoro's executive assistant and spokesman, lawyer Nelson Victorino, said the visit is meant to show the people of Sulu, led by Gov. Sakur Tan, that he is taking the incident seriously.

The defense chief has also directed Esperon to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident.

The AFP top brass earlier said the operation was a legitimate encounter.

Aside from the eight civilians, four Abu Sayyaf members and two soldiers were killed in the firefight, which took place in a mangrove area in Barangay Ipil, Maimbung town.

Five soldiers were reportedly wounded in the clash.

Army chief Lt. Gen. Alexander Yano said there was hostile fire that killed the two soldiers.

This, as Commission on Human Rights regional director Jose Manuel Mamaug, disclosing their initial findings, claimed that there was no exchange of hostile fire. - (By James Mananghaya With Roel Pareño)

MILF, GRP panels to help in Balikatan info drive

ZAMBOANGA CITY (Tuesday, February 12, 2008) – The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) ceasefire panel will help in the information drive on the conduct of the RP-US Balikatan 2008 in known MILF areas in Mindanao.

This developed as a unit of the US National Guard is set to leave Monday for a training exercise in the Philippines, the first time New Mexico guard troops will visit the Pacific islands since World War II.

The coordination between the MILF and the GRP was contained in a joint statement issued by the GRP-MILF Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) during its monthly regular and tripartite meetings with the International Monitoring Team (IMT) over the weekend here.

The joint statement, signed by Brig. Gen. Reynaldo Sealana and Von Alhaq of the MILF, “agreed to maximize the coordination and information drive on the conduct of Balikatan 2008 in line with the guidelines of the GRP-MILF peace process.”

This came about after reports cited that several areas in Central Mindanao, including Sulu, Basilan, and Palawan, will benefit from the humanitarian exercises to be conducted by Filipino and American troops from Feb. 18 to March 3.

The MILF has a heavy presence of forces and civilian communities in Central Mindanao, and partly in Basilan, and Palawan.

Alhaq said they have military and political components in Palawan and Sulu.

“We have agreed that sufficient information on this Balikatan will be provided by our counterpart (GRP) so that once and for all we can inform our field commanders,” Alhaq said.

Some sectors in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur have protested the staging of Balikatan 2008 in their areas.

In a statement, the US Embassy, however, said that during Balikatan 2008, Philippine and US members of the armed forces will conduct humanitarian assistance projects in Central and Western Mindanao, Sulu archipelago and Palawan.

The Filipino and US military participants will hold free medical and dental services, veterinary care, and construction and repair of schools and other community infrastructure.

The field and staff training exercise will be staged in Luzon and Palawan areas.

Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 200th Infantry, based in Las Cruces, will also participate in the Balikatan 2008

[GRP/p.11]

LOOKING . . . from page 2

processes,” as long as it means “taking appropriate legal steps, including revision or amendment of the Philippine Constitution or the passage of a legislation by Congress, after both Parties have signed and entered into a comprehensive peace compact, during the transition period of the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) in order to give meaning and effect the act of entrenching the latter entity while the same undergoes institution- and capacity-building while being devolved with appropriate powers and authority towards effective self-governance preparatory to the determination of its political status via popular consultation leading to a referendum”.

Just a few days after the aborted talks, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Jesus Dureza was quoted as saying that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's cabinet had agreed that the way forward now for the peace talks was for the President to ask Congress and the electorate to amend the 1987 Philippine Constitution, specifically to allow the formation of a Bangsamoro federal state in Mindanao. In a later interview, Dureza also said that a group of Constitutional experts was already working rapidly on coming up with a “federal framework” in an amended Constitution. The details, however, were to be fleshed out later through legislation. He was hopeful that this process could be completed sometime in 2008.

This proposal hews closely to the “Mindanao initiative for sustainable peace and development: A roadmap to a federal republic,” which is being espoused by Dr. Jose P. Abueva, Chairman of the 2005 Consultative Commission on Charter change. Abueva says in his working paper that “the bottom line in the quest for sustainable peace and development in Mindanao is a fundamental change in the structure of power, authority and resources in the historic relations between the National Government in the National Capital Region on the one hand, and on the other hand the local governments and peoples in Mindanao: specifically the Moros, the Lumads, and all other peoples who comprise the majority in Mindanao. This means achieving substantial, sustainable, and meaningful regional and local self-rule (or Regional and Local autonomy) in the assertion of self-determination by the people in Mindanao.”

Dr. Abueva calls for a reinvigorated movement for regional and local autonomy leading to the formation of the Federal Republic of the Philippines, after a period of transition. He proposes that the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) be “re-designed to be more effective, meaningful and sustainable... This will first require constitutional amendments that can and should include the transformation of the entire unitary system into a devolved system of autonomous regions as Proto-States... For it is not possible for the ARMM to become a Bangsamoro Federal State in a unitary political system... The transformation of the Republic of the Philippines as a unitary republic into the Federal Republic of the Philippines is the essence of ‘The Mindanao Initiative’.”

This proposal of undergoing constitutional amendments, however, was not part of the consensus points agreed upon by the negotiating parties in the peace talks; hence, it drew negative reactions from the MILF. Mohagher Iqbal, MILF chief negotiator, was quoted in an interview with a national daily as saying that the MILF would not oppose Charter change as long as the issue of the peace talks was not dragged into it. He called instead for a resumption of the negotiations, and for the signing of the memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain before discussing the political package for the Bangsamoro.

It was in the thick of these debates on the country's Charter in relation to the peace process that the roundtable discussion was held, under the auspices of the Institute for Autonomy and Governance. The discourses revolved around the following guide questions: *Is meaningful Bangsamoro self-determination possible under the current Constitution? What are the provisions that promote or inhibit the exercise of*

[LOOKING /p.6]

LOOKING . . . from page 5

self-determination for Muslims in the Philippines? What Constitutional amendments, if any, may be introduced in order to secure and make effective the right of the Bangsamoro people to self-determination? Are there provisions that could be passed via ordinary legislation? Under present circumstances, what possible modes of Charter change for Moro self-determination may be adopted?

Weakness of the 1987 Philippine Constitution's "framework"

Several participants pointed to the 1987 Philippine Constitution's inherent weakness in providing a framework to negotiate a political settlement for the Bangsamoro people. Negotiation requires two or more discourses in order to come to terms. The Philippine Constitution basically embodies only one discourse—the discourse of the majority people of the country, and inadequately addresses the aspirations of its minority populations. The Constitution's paradigm and parameters are directed at effectively assimilating the minority, rather than effectively promoting minority peoples' unique dignity and rights.

A change of perspective is needed and may be facilitated by revisiting and revising our notion of "nationhood" and how this can be expressed in the Constitution. Our diverse ethno-linguistic groups should be rightfully recognized as "nations", and consequently, the Philippines can be considered to be composed of several nations (including the Bangsamoro and indigenous peoples) with inherent rights to self-determination.

Recourse to international laws and principles, borne of the experience and practice of other nations, provides a critical opening for finding a way to recognize the rights of "nations" within the Philippine nation-state.

The government's openness to explore avenues for constitutional accommodation of Bangsamoro self-determination, as gleaned from the latest statements of several of its officials, is a significant enough development in so far as it is an acknowledgment of the inadequacies of our country's Charter to bring about a workable formula for sustainable Mindanao peace and development.

Meaningful Bangsamoro self-determination

Early on in the roundtable discussions, the issue of what constituted "meaningful" self-determination came to fore. The right to self-determination is the right of peoples everywhere to freely determine their political status, to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development, to freely dispose natural wealth and resources, and to autonomy or self-government in internal and financial affairs. It is an ongoing process where people continue to make choices to nurture their dignity and to fulfill their needs.

This right is enshrined in many United Nations instruments, among which are: Article 55 of the UN Charter, the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of December 14, 1960, and Article 1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

According to the Report of the International Conference of Experts organized by UNESCO on November 21-27, 1998, the holder of the right of self-determination are a people who have some or all of the following common features:

- common historical tradition;
- racial or ethnic identity;
- cultural homogeneity;
- linguistic unity;
- religious or ideological affinity;
- territorial connection; and
- common economic life.

Additionally, the UNESCO experts stated that "the group as a whole must have the will to be identified as a people or the consciousness of being a people. Such people must be of a certain number, which need not

be large but must be more than "a mere association of individuals within a state." The existence of "institutions or other means of expressing its common characteristics and will for identity" is also important.

The Bangsamoro people clearly qualify as a people who hold the right to self-determination because they have a common historical tradition, religious affinity, and share many cultural practices. They also occupy contiguous territory. In a very real sense, too, they have a "will for identity" as Bangsamoro.

Recognition of the Bangsamoro right to self-determination

Whether the Bangsamoro people are entitled to self-determination or not is no longer a matter of debate because the Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines recognizes this. Section 2, Article II of the Philippine Constitution states that: *"The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation, and amity with all nations."* Further in Section 7 of Article II, it is provided that *"[The] State shall pursue an independent foreign policy. In its relations with other states, the paramount consideration shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination."* By recognizing the rules and principles of international law as contained in treaties to which the government is a signatory or shall be a signatory, such principles become part of the "law of the land" and thus have Constitutional status and significance.

Moreover, in the Tripoli Agreement of 2001 between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, both parties agreed that "the observance of international humanitarian law and respect for internationally-recognized human rights instruments and the protection of evacuees and displaced persons in the conduct of their relations reinforce the Bangsamoro people's fundamental right to determine their own future and political status".

Similarly, then Chairman of the GRP Negotiating Panel Sec. Silvestre Afable, wrote in November 2006 to Mohagher Iqbal, Chairman of the MILF Negotiating Panel, of the government's desire to explore with the MILF "the grant of self-determination and self-rule to the Bangsamoro people based on an Organic Charter to be drafted by representatives of the Bangsamoro people".

Constitutional rethinking and accommodation

Acknowledging that the right to self-determination is part of the law of the land and having Constitutional force and effect, the 1987 Philippine Constitution need not be amended or changed in order for the right of self-determination of the Bangsamoro people to be recognized further and enforced.

On the other hand, the "autonomy" provisions of the Philippine Constitution, as found in Article X, provide very limited options for the exercise of the right to self-determination. There are no relevant provisions that would effectively grant the self-determination rights as provided under international law. In the one instance where provisions are present, as in Sections 19 and 20, the rights are subordinated to Congress and the branches of National Government, rendering self-determination ineffective.

Thus, Article X can be said to be not exhaustive of the possible modes for the Bangsamoro people to concretize their right to self-determination. The search must continue for other legally tenable and Constitutionally-acceptable ways to address this issue of Bangsamoro self-determination.

One of the avenues suggested was that of the "framework treaty," in which the consensus points already agreed upon by the GRP and the MILF during the exploratory talks could serve as a "framework treaty" or basis for later and more detailed protocols or agreements or Comprehensive Peace Compact that would spell out the principles agreed upon in the framework treaty.

The auspices of influential international facilitators and monitors, who will have authority to resolve disputes between the parties, would be deemed

TRANSPARENCY . . . from page 3

exercises ministerial control over dozens of devolved line agencies and support offices, and the 24-seat Regional Assembly, also dubbed as the region's "little Congress."

The ARMM's legislature, now under the speakership of Tago, an ethnic Maranaw accountant-lawyer, is represented by three elected assemblymen from each of the region's seven congressional districts.

Tago said the OIC is expecting the five joint working groups (JWGs) tasked to review the peace agreement based on five key areas — Sharia; education; political representation of Moro communities; regional security force; economic development and natural resources — to submit their output by May 1 to be discussed in the May 12-15 third tripartite meeting at a still unannounced venue.

"I have assured the parties present in the Istanbul meeting, on behalf of Gov. Ampatuan, that we in the ARMM will support fully the effort to enhance the GRP-MNLF peace pact. Whatever good we do in the tripartite review of that agreement will benefit not just the MNLF, but also all of the more than three million people in the ARMM," Tago said.

Tago said the ARMM is amply represented in the five JWGs, comprised of three representatives each from the government and the MNLF.

Sources close to the front's founding chairman, Nur Misuari, said he has remained pat in his position of not involving in the activities of the five JWGs any of his 15 subordinates, among them Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, ARMM Assemblyman Hatimil Hassan, and Sulu Rep. Yusoph Jikiri, who took over, as a 15-member council, the MNLF's leadership in 2000 due to differences with the former.

Members of the now defunct "Council of 15" signed last month a manifesto urging the OIC to intervene on the issue, questioning why Misuari has enlisted non-MNLF members to represent him in the three-way effort of resolving perceived kinks in the peace pact, which the OIC, a pan-Islamic block of more than 50 Muslim countries, including oil-rich Arab nations, helped broker as mediator.

"In essence, the MNLF and the government were given a challenge by the OIC to initiate, through mutual cooperation, possible amendments to the ARMM charter as part of the effort to sustain the gains of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement," Tago said.

Tago said the OIC's mandate for the GRP and the MNLF to focus on making the GRP-MNLF peace pact and R.A. 9054 parallel with each other was contained in a joint communiqué forged by both sides in the last

5,000 . . . from page 4

draft of a proposed memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain did not contain much of the consensus points earlier agreed by the two parties.

The GRP also inserted a provision, which states that the implementation of the agreement will have to follow constitutional process.

Since deposed President Joseph Ejercito Estrada's declaration of all-out war in 2000, the GRP-MILF peace talks progressed when government agreed not to use the constitution as a framework and the MILF dropped its demand for independence.

Situations have been aggravated by recent statements from some of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's key officials threatening the MILF with sanctions.

Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno said government should not give in to the MILF's demand for a "juridical entity" without a plebiscite, while AFP Vice Chief Lt. Gen. Antonio Romero stated that peace talks would not continue without MILF's disarmament.

Secretary Jesus Dureza, the presidential adviser on the peace process, analyzed the impasse as "among the most serious to stall the rocky talks, a big hump" upon which the GRP has no "magic formula" while "looking for a way out".

Over 100,000 demonstrators took to the streets in Cotabato, Marawi, General Santos, and Iligan last month to break the impasse.

"It is high time that the people of Basilan should be aware of the peace processes because they are affected by it and the end benefits eventually go to them," said Lantawan Mayor Tahira Ali.

"The people of Basilan want peace in their province. The people are united in attaining peace in Basilan. This can be attained if it is not mixed with political motives by those in power," Vice Governor Rashid Sakkalahul said. (Norodin Makalay) —

www.mindanaoexaminer.com

day of the second tripartite meeting in Istanbul.

The communiqué was signed by Deputy Presidential Adviser on Peace Process Hadji Nabil Tan, on GRP's behalf; by human rights lawyer as sole representative of Misuari; and a ranking member of the Indonesian diplomatic corps, Rezlan Jennie.

Indonesia leads the OIC's Southern Philippines Peace Committee, whose members include the governments of Libya, Brunei, Malaysia, Pakistan, Somalia, Senegal, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Bangladesh. ()

LOOKING . . . from page 6

necessary and crucial for guaranteeing compliance of the terms of the agreement by the parties to the agreement.

A doable proposition

One of the proposals that generated much interest and energy at the roundtable discussion was a method of constitutional accommodation that consisted of the following phases:

- Recognition of the Bangsamoro as a distinct nation and providing for its creation within the Republic of the Philippines through an act of Congress;
- Definition of the Bangsamoro territory or homeland;
- Drafting of a Basic Charter for the Bangsamoro nation through a convention of Bangsamoro representatives;
- Outlining the broad powers of the Bangsamoro government such as: legislative powers except foreign affairs, national defense and security, postal service, coinage and fiscal/monetary policies; executive powers subject to some supervision by the President of the Philippines; and judicial powers (not just personal or property laws) but subject to a review of decisions by the Supreme Court;
- Providing for a transition mechanism while the Basic Charter is being drafted, to include the status of the ARMM;
- Ratification of the Basic Charter by the Bangsamoro people;
- Acceptance of the Basic Charter by the President of the Philippines.

Such proposition would be in keeping with the spirit of the Tripoli Agreement of June 2001, where the GRP and the MILF mutually agreed "to open new formulas that permanently respond to the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people for freedom".

In this case, it would be the GRP's responsibility to deliver its commitments by exercising the appropriate political, moral, and legal pressure on its institutions and instrumentalities to see the process through. It would also provide an opportunity to make the issue of Bangsamoro self-determination a national agenda to surface lingering biases and prejudices and generate the critical mass to once and for all allow the Bangsamoro to express and define their destiny by themselves. Government's political will is thus seen as critical to the success of this process.

Bangsamoro unity

The desired empowerment that comes with the grant of the Bangsamoro peoples' right to self-determination will entail the challenge for the Bangsamoro themselves to work at unity and integration. Issues remain as regards which group truly represents the Bangsamoro people and suspicions of selfish motives over political spoils and perks.

There must be a democratic process installed for the selection of its leadership in the envisioned Bangsamoro nation. Moro institutions will also need to be strengthened. What is significant here is that the Bangsamoro will decide the arrangements among themselves, without allowing one group to lord it over another. The Bangsamoro peoples' ownership of the political solution is as critical as the ownership of this solution by the rest of Philippine society.

The issue of what happens to the 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement is also contentious and will have to be the subject of mutual discussions between the MNLF and the MILF. The MNLF feels that while the doable proposal looks appealing, the question remains whether the government has the political will to meet its commitments, given the current frustrations over the implementation of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement.

Other critical issues

Towards the end of the roundtable discussions, attention was given to issues of advocacy, with the goal of harnessing critical ownership of the peace process and its fruits, particularly among grassroots communities. Along this line, several ideas were shared.

- Joint advocacy poses difficulties; therefore, responsibility is left to each party to communicate developments in the peace talks to their respective constituencies.

- There is a need to expand the space for advocacy in a systematic manner, particularly in the people-to-people level. This would mean inviting the parties in the negotiation process to open up a little bit more and share the major

NEW . . . from page 3

commented Datu Haron Bandila, chairman of the Regional Business Council in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Bandila said he is certain Nograles, as a native of Davao City, will also easily comprehend the socio-economic, religious and political intricacies of the ARMM, which is home to more than three million Moro residents.

De Venecia's unprecedented five terms as Speaker of the House came to an end last Monday night after President Arroyo's congressmen-allies led by her two sons replaced him with Davao City Rep. Prospero Nograles.

Needing only 121 votes to officially unseat the beleaguered Speaker, the ax fell when Rep. Katrina Ponce Enrile, daughter of Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile, cast a "yes" vote at 11:04 p.m.

As of 12:42 a.m. Tuesday, 174 congressmen had voted to oust De Venecia, 35 voted against while 16 abstained.

Smelling victory, the pro-Malacañang lawmakers went for the kill despite a consensus among leaders of the ruling Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats and other member-parties in the administration coalition to give the protagonists 24 hours to agree on a smooth turnover.

The House declared the speakership vacant and paved the way for Nograles to assume the post.

Earlier, De Venecia declared the end of his alliance with President Arroyo whom he accused of masterminding attempts to oust him and of being behind most of the controversies that rocked the country including political killings and high-level corruption.

De Venecia made the allegations in an emotional – and well applauded – speech that dragged on for almost an hour from the 10 minutes that he had been allowed to deliver it.

The House voted on a motion by Palawan Rep. Abraham Mitra to declare the position of Speaker vacant.

De Venecia said in his speech that the President herself, through her sons Pampanga Rep. Mikey Arroyo and Camarines Sur Rep. Diosdado Arroyo and partymates in the Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino, initiated his ouster as speaker. (with details lifted from www.philstar.com, February 5 web edition)

points of their negotiations in public forums, so that people are not caught unawares about what to expect in the future. This democratic discourse in a multi-track approach to the peace process can be beneficial to ensuring the success of the agreement's implementation later on. In order to skirt the issue of unduly breaking confidentiality during the negotiation process, one suggestion was for the forums to dwell more on stories and scenarios from the people's point of view, which those privy to the peace talks can validate or respond to.

- There is also the felt need to establish a system for a central downloading forum for correct information about the issues and the negotiation process. This reduces the anxieties that can come from misguided speculations about what's being cooked up.

- Carefully choosing those who do the advocacy for the parties will also contribute to a more positive reception on the part of the people.

- Language precision in the terms being used in the peace talks will also help clarify misunderstandings that can jeopardize the talks.

- Conducting a comprehensive stakeholder analysis will help identify the sectors of society which need to be made part of the process to reduce chances of spoilers to the efforts.

- Finally, bringing the issue of Bangsamoro self-determination to the level of dispassionate discussion in the national consciousness may expose continued biases and prejudices among peoples, but at the same time be an effective means of drawing the lines and showing to whom more convincing needs to be made as regards the Bangsamoro people's aspirations for freedom.]

IMT . . . from page 12

698 armed clashes in 2002, reduced to 559 in 2003, significantly dropping to 15 in 2004 upon the intervention of the IMT, then 10 clashes in 2005. The figure rose to 13 clashes in 2006, but then dropped to 7 in 2007.

In Zamboanga City, Von Al Haq, the chair of the MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH), assured that the peace process is still on track, in light of speculations of certain groups trying to sabotage the development of the peace process.

"We are working hard, regardless of those bad elements on the ground, with the condition that we have close coordination with our counterparts," stressed Al Haq.

The IMT noted that the clash between the police and MILF in Lakiki, Sibuco, Zamboanga del Norte was the first recorded conflict for 2008. One civilian was killed while four others, including the town's police chief, were injured in the clash. The lone fatality was identified as 58-year-old Hadja Noraida Langgal.

The local police and Bantay Ceasefire (Ceasefire Watch), a grassroots peace monitor, presented different versions of the incident which triggered the evacuation of close to 300 families.

Initial media reports echoed claims by the police that some Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters initiated the attack.

But a Bantay Ceasefire team sent to Lakiki said it appeared that it was the police who attacked the MILF.

"Based on the accounts of the people in the community and ocular inspection in the site of the encounter, it can be said that it was the police who attacked the Moro rebels first," Pastor Rey Montecillo, a member of the grassroots peace monitor, said.

The group also noted the presence of evacuees who were left to fend for themselves. It said 165 families from Lakiki and 100 others from nearby barangay Kabunan left their homes.

Witnesses who are mostly of barangay officials alleged it was the police, who were positioned on high ground, who fired at the MILF fighters numbering about 40.

The firefight lasted from 8 a.m. until 12 noon, not 30 minutes as reported earlier.

Al Haq said a joint investigation will be conducted to determine the "real cause of the incident".

"We will conduct a probe into that incident as we have to deescalate the conflict to normalize the situation," he said.

Yassin bin Mat Daud stressed that "if both the government forces and the MILF will only observe close coordination, the eruption of conflict will be prevented,"

LAKAS . . . from page 12

mayors, have always been loyal supporters of the President, "and this we re-affirm amidst the change of leadership in the House of Representatives."

He had repeatedly said that their support for the President will remain whatever happens.

Last year, the ARMM governor brought his governors, congressmen, city and municipal mayors to a dinner meeting with the President in Malacañang.

They unanimously endorsed Ampatuan to the President for "anointment" as administration candidate in the ARMM August 2008 elections.

The Muslim leaders signed a resolution endorsing the regional governor's continued leadership of the ARMM.

Engineer Norie Unas, Maguindanao provincial administrator, recalled that after the dinner meeting at the Palace, President Arroyo had assured Ampatuan of his anointment for his reelection bid.

"Congratulations, Zaldy, you are now a reelected regional governor of ARMM," Unas quoted the President as saying to the surprise of the Muslim leaders.

In their meeting in Manila last Wednesday, the ARMM officials expressed support for newly installed House Speaker Nograles.

Nograles is the first congressman from Mindanao to become Speaker of the House.

Nograles took his oath of office early Tuesday as new House Speaker, replacing five-time Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr., who is the president of the LakasCMD party.

"In behalf of the leadership of the autonomous region, we congratulate Speaker Prospero Nograles for his historic rise to the highest position in the House of Representatives," Ampatuan said.

"Leaders of Maguindanao led by my father Gov. Datu Andal Ampatuan Sr. are very proud of the new House Speaker and we assure him of our all-out support, as he leads the Lower House in serving the nation and the Filipinos," he said. — Manila Bulletin/www.mb.com.ph, article by Ali Macabalang and Edd Usman

apparently referring to the Lakiki clash.

Al Haq seconded that "communication at all levels is very important," adding that the MILF "believe that the most practical and civilized way of resolving conflict is through negotiation, talking with your adversary."

Both Yassin bin Mat Daud and Al Haq were part of the Joint GRP-MILF CCCH and IMT 4 Familiarization Tour, which started Feb. 1 from Cotabato City and will end Feb. 9 in Zamboanga City. They will visit Basilan tomorrow (Feb. 7).

The government was represented by Gen. Rey Sealana who heads the government CCCH. (With reports from Angel Tiamson-Saceda)

WALKOUT . . . from page 1

international airport in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Speaker Paisalin Tago of the ARMM Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA) said the inclusion of the R.A. 9054 in the talks caused the near collapse of the talks during the final day on Feb. 14.

These are among the outcomes of the Istanbul talks, the second to review the peace accord negotiated and brokered by the OIC from 1994 to 1996 during the administration of the then President Fidel V. Ramos.

"If not for the OIC and the GRP, the MNLF delegation had threatened to walk out after learning that R.A. 9054 will be included in the joint communique. Saudi Arabia's representative to the peace committee of the OIC and us in the Philippine group appealed to our MNLF brothers to accept the communique because the organic act is already there," Tago told Manila Bulletin.

The Peace Committee for Southern Philippines (PCSP) has been tasked by the OIC to monitor the implementation of the FPA. The MNLF has an observer status in the OIC.

Indonesia chairs the PCSP, while the members are Saudi Arabia, Libya, Brunei, Malaysia, Pakistan, Somalia, Senegal, Turkey, Egypt and Bangladesh. Ambassador Sayyed Kassem El-Masry, OIC special envoy to the MNLF talks, is the representative of the OIC Secretariat General to the PCSP.

Peace Process Undersecretary Nabil Tan led the government delegation that included five representatives of ARMM sent by Regional Gov. Datu Zaldy Uy Ampatuan. Tago led the five-man team of ARMM.

"I have assured the parties present in the Istanbul meeting, on behalf of Governor Ampatuan, that we in the ARMM will support fully the effort to enhance the GRP-MNLF peace pact. Whatever good we do in the tripartite review of that agreement will benefit not just the MNLF, but also all of the more than three million people in the ARMM," said the ARMMRLA speaker.

Lawyer Randolph Parcasio, a close ally of detained MNLF chieftain Nur Misuari, headed the MNLF group.

The ARMM is a major stakeholder in the Mindanao peace processes (with the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front). Ampatuan has repeatedly stressed his administration's support for both peace talks.

OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsangulo convened the three-party meeting (with OIC as host and mediator) to discuss the conflicting reports on the FPA's implementation submitted by GRP and MNLF.

GRP officials said the FPA's Phase 1 (military and political) has been fully implemented and the Phase 2 (socio-economic) is still ongoing but on a slow pace due to meager financial resources.

MNLF leaders said there are still many provisions that have yet to be implemented. (By EDD K. USMAN)

GRP . . . from page 12

Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Kampala, Uganda.

The working groups — on Shari'ah and Judiciary; Special Regional Security Force (SRSF) and Unified Command for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao; Natural Resources and Economic Development issues (including mines and minerals); Political system and representation; and Education — were also urged to invite experts "to assist in the exercise of their mandates."

The Communique was signed by Undersecretary Nabil Tan, deputy presidential adviser on the peace process and head of the government delegation; Randolph Parcasio of the MNLF; Indonesian Ambassador Rezlan I. Jennie, director for Multilateral Affairs of Indonesia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Chair of the OIC Peace Committee for the Southern Philippines (OIC-PCSP), and Ambassador Zayed El-Masry, special envoy to the OIC.

The Communique also noted that both government and the MNLF reaffirmed their commitment to the "primacy of the 1996 FPA in order to provide a congenial environment for its unhampered implementation."

"The Meeting underscored the cardinal importance of social economic development but outlined that such development is conditional on the creation of a climate of peace and security through confidence building measures that include rehabilitation, relief, and reconstruction and attending to the problems of internally displaced people. Both parties should jointly undertake these exercises under the framework of the JWGs," it said.

The review of the 1996 peace pact's implementation was proposed in May 2006 by a Fact-Finding Mission sent by the OIC to look into the implementation of the September 2, 1996 peace agreement, given the conflicting reports from the government and MNLF.

The Tripartite Meeting, supposedly scheduled for July 2006 finally pushed through only in November 2007 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The Jeddah talks in November 2007 led to the creation of the five joint working groups tasked to review the implementation of the 1996 peace pact. The groups met in Manila on January 3 to 7 for the review but no consensus was reached. The government and MNLF filed separate reports.

The Istanbul meeting instructed the joint working groups to "examine further the positions of the two sides in order to arrive at commonalities by examining those provisions of the 1996 FPA which were not fully implemented and come up with mutually acceptable solutions," the Communique said.

The working groups' meetings were attended by representatives of the OIC's Peace Committee for Southern Philippines (PCSP), an 11-nation expanded version of what used to be the Ministerial Committee of the Eight headed by Indonesia. (MindaNews)

CEASEFIRE . . . *from page 1*

With the ceasefire in place, such incidents went down to 559 in 2003, when the government called for the presence of foreign truce monitors, and further to 15 in 2005 and 10 the following year.

Despite hostilities in Basilan, the number was down to a single digit – seven – last year, Yasin said.

“What I am trying to say is that with the cooperation of the stakeholders and the people in Mindanao, hostilities are going down drastically by 99 percent,” he said, citing just one incident in Barangay Lakiki in Sibuco, Zamboanga del Norte.

“I do hope that with the cooperation of everyone there will be no more encounters,” he added.

Yasin said there should be a peaceful environment on the ground to allow the negotiating panels of the government and the MILF to craft a peace accord.

Von Alhaq, the MILF’s JCC head, said the ceasefire is effectively holding on the ground, citing the front’s close coordination with the military.

“We have achieved many accomplishments on the ground. But out of that we cannot deny the fact that the role of the IMT is so vital unlike before (when there was) no intervention,” Alhaq said.

Alhaq said the impasse in the peace talks has not affected the ceasefire.

“The more that we have to close our ranks in preventing any incidents,” he said.

Brig. Gen. Reynaldo Sealana, the government’s JCC panel chief, gave assurance that President Arroyo has instructed them to see to it that the ceasefire would hold on the ground.

“Our peace panels cannot properly and smoothly talk about a negotiated solution to the decade-old problem without peace on the ground,” Sealana said. — By Roel Pareño, www.philstar.com

GRP . . . *from page 5*

Training Exercise later this month. The unit is commanded by Lt. Col. Marc Arellano.

New Mexico has a special connection to the Philippines because of the infamous Bataan Death March, which included captured troops from the New Mexico National Guard’s 200th Coast Artillery.

Some 70,000 American and Filipino troops who surrendered to Japanese forces on the Bataan Peninsula in April 1942 were forced to march 65 miles without food or water to prison camps.

Those who collapsed along the way were shot or bayoneted. About 1,800 of the captives were from New Mexico; fewer than 900 of those men survived the march or the following years in prison camps.

“It’s a historic event,” Arellano said. “We feel proud and honored to be able to represent the New Mexico National Guard and our Bataan veterans by attending this training exercise. We look forward to re-establishing our ties with the Philippine people.” (By Roel Pareño, www.philstar.com, published February 12, 2008)

US . . . *from page 1*

months, was accompanied by US embassy head of mission Paul Jones, representatives of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and four unarmed security escorts.

Asked on the real agenda of their brief dialogue with Kenney, Murad said: “We are on track. We are negotiating now so we can achieve the aspirations of the people.”

Washington has pledged tens of millions of dollars in aid to the troubled Mindanao once a peace treaty is signed with the MILF.

“We are just discussing some issues now and we are returning to the peace table in March,” he added.

The USAID has been implementing various multi-million projects in impoverished Muslim communities in the South even before the signing of the Sept. 2, 1996 peace pact between the government and the MILF.

Murad hinted, however, that Kenney, who was adopted last year by the city government of Cotabato as an honorary member of the local Moro royalty, personally expressed her support to the on-going government-MILF talks.

The GRP-MILF talks, which started on Jan. 7, 1997, has now become a showcase of multi-national peace-building cooperation, with the direct participation of Malaysia, Brunei, and Libya, Japan, and Canada, in the extensive monitoring of the ceasefire between the rebel group and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

Apart from the USAID, other foreign donors, including the European Union, have been helping, through socio-economic interventions, the 11-year peace overture.

Although preparations were initiated last week, the meeting of Kenney with members of the MILF’s central committee was only announced at 7 a.m. yesterday over Catholic station dxMS by MILF’s front’s political affairs chief, Ghadzali Jaafar.

Kenney was the first US ambassador to visit an MILF enclave.

Murad said Kenney’s visit to Camp Darapanan was a very “good gesture and would surely hasten the stalled GRP-MILF talks.”

The US ambassador said peace in Mindanao is for the benefit of everybody, not only the Bangsamoro people, but the international community as well.

The completion of a final peace agreement between the government and the MILF hit a snag in December due to disagreements over the issue of “ancestral domains” or government recognition of areas where the country’s Muslim minority would have some control.

GRP, MNLF mandated to formulate "possible proposals to amend



WATER SYSTEM --- Robert Barnes (right) and Liza Chiles (second from right), of the United States Agency for International Development, looks as Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema and Virgilio Leyretana of the Mindanao Economic Council as they inspect a roadside water supply system in Kakar area, Cotabato City, which the USAID help build. The facility was opened to public use last February 20.[]

Lakas-CMD leaders in ARMM renew their allegiance to Arroyo

COTABATO CITY (February 9, 2008) - All members of the ruling Lakas-CMD party, the five provincial governors in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and ARMM Gov. Zaldy Uy Ampatuan have renewed allegiance to President Arroyo in the wake of the ouster of Rep. Jose de Venecia as speaker of the House of Representatives.

Led by the ARMM chief executive, Governors Bombit Adiong of Lanao del Sur, Andal Ampatuan of Maguindanao, Sakur Tan of Sulu, Jum Akbar of Basilan, Dick Sahali of Tawi-Tawi, and acting Governor Ibrahim Ibay Jr. of Shariff Kabunsuan met a day after the House change of guard and conveyed their renewed support for President Arroyo.

They hailed the election of Davao City Rep. Prospero Nograles as Speaker of the House, saying his rise to the speakership has brightened prospects for the passage of legislative measures that would benefit Mindanao.

Governor Ampatuan said all top leaders in ARMM, including the five governors, two city mayors and 88 town

[LAKAS/p.9]

DAVAO CITY (Monday, 18 February 2008)- The joint working groups of the government and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) have been given an "expanded mandate" to formulate "possible proposals" to amend Republic Act 9054, the law passed after the signing of the 1996 "Final Peace Agreement" which was supposed to have incorporated provisions of the peace pact into the law governing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)

This was the agreement reached during the 2nd tripartite meeting of the GRP, MNLF and Organization of the Islamic Conference held February 14-16 in Istanbul, Turkey.

The MNLF has been holding an observer status in the pan-Islamic body for three decades now.

According to the Communique signed at the end of the meeting, the five joint working groups are expected to submit their progress reports by May 1 this year for consideration in the third tripartite meeting on May 12 to 15 at a still unannounced venue. The working groups' reports will be transmitted to the 35th Session of the

[GRP/p.10]

IMT: conditions conducive to signing peace agreement

IPIL, Zamboanga Sibugay (MindaNews/5 Feb) - Conditions on the ground are conducive to the resumption of the peace talks and the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation (MILF) this year. This was the assessment of Maj. Gen. Datuk Mat Yassin bin Mat Daud, head of the Malaysia-led International Monitoring Team (IMT), in an interview after a briefing in 102 Infantry Brigade based here on the peace situation in the province.

The IMT - composed of Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Japan - oversee the ceasefire between the government and MILF.

"Ground conditions are very conducive to the resumption of the peace talks as we effectively reduced the number of hostilities in Mindanao," Yassin bin Mat Daud said.

The IMT head claimed that since the monitoring team arrived, fighting between government and rebel forces has drastically decreased. The IMT has recorded

[IMT/p.9]