



Esperon sees peace pact with MILF in one year



BAYANIHAN — Members of the MILF help remove water lilies that clogged the Rio Grande de Mindanao, causing the waterway to overflow and inundate more than half of the land area of Cotabato City and many low-lying areas in Shariff Kabunsuan province.[]

Esperon for extension of IMT

KIDAPAWAN CITY – Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon Jr. is pushing for the extension and expansion of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) to facilitate the success of the current peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The Malaysian-led IMT will end its official mandate by August this year, but Esperon cited the positive progress of the peace negotiations specifically on ancestral domain because the IMT are instrumental in assuring ceasefire between government troops and the MILF.

According to the MILF Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) before the deployment

[**EXTENSION/p.10**]

NEWLY installed Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process retired Gen. Hermogenes Esperon Jr. yesterday said the government will sign the final peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in a year's time, adding that the kidnapping of ABS-CBN news anchor Ces Drilon, her two cameramen, and a civilian would not distract the government's peace efforts.

In an interview after formally taking over the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Process (OPAPP), Esperon said the peace process with the MILF is now on the last of its four laps.

He said the signing of the final peace agreement with the MILF would be part of his short-term objective as presidential adviser on the peace process.

He added that he will also work for the reopening of

[**ESPERON/p.11**]

Some areas in south still safe despite kidnappings

European diplomats air view on Mindanao security situation

EUROPEAN Union diplomats have expressed belief that some areas in Mindanao are still safe despite recent kidnappings in the south, but they warned that these incidents put a cloud of doubt over the security situation in the Philippines.

Ambassador Alistair MacDonald, head of the European Commission (EC) to the Philippines, and Dutch Ambassador Robert Brinks, shared the view that the kidnappings, particularly the high-profile abduction of the ABS-CBN crew, won't change the country's image in the international community.

MacDonald, accompanied by his wife Brigitte and Brinks, visited recently Sultan Kudarat and North Cotabato for the ceremonies closing the EC-backed

[**SOME/p.10**]

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Loren urges more gov't support for ARMM

Says Ces kidnapers mere bandits, not ideologues

Senator Loren Legarda cited yesterday the need to differentiate between the bandits who kidnapped an ABS-CBN news crew led by Ces Drilon from the ideologues fighting for much-needed reforms and a way out of dehumanizing poverty in Mindanao.

"The kidnapers being young and rash made it more dangerous for Ces, her two cameramen and Prof. Octavio Dinampo," said Legarda.

"I thank God I was able to gain their confidence to release Ces and company unharmed. That's all that matters to me, thus I frown on the post-release circus we are seeing now," she added.

Legarda said there's no justifying the illegal activities of armed groups in Mindanao, whom she said the government must go after.

Nonetheless, she stressed that the root causes of the problem in Mindanao – grinding poverty and the marginalization of its people – must be solved if armed struggle is to cease.

It is for this reason, Legarda said, that she has been calling for more financial, social, livelihood, health and educational support from the national government for the Autonomous Region in Muslim

[LOREN /p.9]

Gov't receives MILF reply to draft agreement

DAVAO CITY (MindaNews/02 July) – The Philippine government received Tuesday the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) reply to its draft memorandum of agreement on the ancestral domain, government peace panel chair Rodolfo Garcia announced.

Garcia, who retired as Armed Forces vice chief of staff, told MindaNews the MILF has counter proposals he cannot as yet divulge.

But he quickly added "there are good possibilities."

"Once cleared by our side, I believe talks will then be scheduled," he said.

MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal told MindaNews Wednesday morning that their "proposal this time is multiple choice. Three options for GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines) to choose one, for each of the remaining three issues on governance."

"I can't go into details," Iqbal said but he acknowledged the "three governance issues" are the only kinks that need to be ironed out.

Iqbal, like his counterpart Garcia, sounded optimistic. "I think the gap will eventually close if GRP really wants to sign (the agreement on ancestral domain)."

The MILF received the government peace panel's draft through the Malaysian facilitator on June 25 and sent its reply last Sunday, June 29.

The Philippine government's peace panel received a copy on July 1.

No date has been set for the government and MILF peace panels to meet in Kuala Lumpur.

This as the government's policy on the "primacy of the peace process" was put to test again Tuesday with military commanders holding on amid harassments from the MILF and calls for engagement from their own men.

"If (Major) General (Raymundo) Ferrer (commander of the 6th Infantry Division) will commit my battalion, the situation will be irreversible," a field officer in one of the areas that were reportedly harassed by MILF forces, told MindaNews.

Ferrer, a division commander who adheres to the primacy of the peace process and whose leadership is marked by peace-building seminars within his command, did not.

The field officer said the MILF central committee "must not be ambiguous in what they are talking about and what they are doing on the ground."

"Tell them to be patient and just adhere to the ceasefire agreement. The Malaysians (the facilitator of the talks) will not lose. We will lose when fighting ensues," he said.

Last week, a paramilitary element was killed and

[GOVT/p.8]

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700 evacuee-families seek refuge in Maitum center

MAITUM, Sarangani (MindaNews/26 June) — Some 700 families or around 3,000 individuals from four barangays of this town have evacuated to the municipal gymnasium and at the Malalag Central Elementary School following the encounter between government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces in the villages of Mindupok and Maguling Wednesday.

The evacuees, composed mostly of children and elderly women from among the settlers and the T'boli tribe, are being aided by the municipal government through its Social Welfare and Development (SWD) Office and the Municipal Disaster Coordinating Council (MDCC).

Raymundo Mayled, a staffmember of the SWD who was among those assisting the evacuees at the municipal gymnasium, said there were other house-based evacuees who sought refuge at relatives' houses in the town center who have not been listed.

Mayled identified Ticulab, Mindupok, Upo, and Maguling as the barangays affected.

Maguling barangay chair Remegio Rivac, whose barangay he said is composed of 50% settlers and 50% Muslims, said "almost all houses" vacated by the residents were allegedly ransacked by armed men believed to be members of the MILF.

Civilians at the evacuation center confirmed having heard their houses ransacked. Among those looted by the armed men are "rice, jewelry, cash, and other things easy for the looters to carry."

Liloy Alisin, a member of the Citizens Armed Geographical Unit, who was the first to respond to the firing incident at Barangay Ticulab at around 6 in the morning, was reportedly fired upon by the rebels. He died on the spot and his remains were recovered on Thursday morning.

Alisin's son, who was identified by his grandmother Leonora Brakero, 79, as "Neneng," sustained bullet wound on his upper left arm.

"Liloy was armed but was not able to fire a shot because the rebels hit him first. Neneng was unarmed," said Brakero in an interview at a classroom that serves as her temporary shelter with six other families.

Rubylyn Nabran, the municipal assessor of this town, who is member of the MDCC, said they have yet to consolidate reports of property looted by the armed men.

"We were supposed to distribute relief goods to flood victims today, but we are again faced with this new problem. After the natural calamity hit us — this man-made disaster again," she said while accompanying this reporter to the evacuation centers.

Fr. Ricky Legario, the parish priest of Maitum who,

[EVACUEE/p.7]

MILF deal may expand ARMM homeland for Moros to include 5 other provinces

The composition of the new territory to be considered the ancestral homeland of three million Moros in Mindanao, it is hoped, would result from a peace agreement between the government and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), according to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's adviser on the peace process.

The "projected" territory referred to as the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity is the "current" Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which may be expanded to include 712 barangays (villages) in five provinces, Hermogenes Esperon Jr. said Thursday.

He said the five provinces were Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Zamboanga-Sibugay, and Palawan.

"The MILF has agreed that additions to the present ARMM will be subject to the conduct of a plebiscite... We promised to cause the [conduct] of the plebiscite six months after the signing of the MOA (memorandum of agreement)," Esperon told reporters.

He said the two panels would meet on July 24 to determine the formal signing date of the MOA, and the formal peace talks — which had stalled on the issue of ancestral domain — would resume after that.

"Whether it will take one month or one year, we don't know. But we would like to build on the goodwill that has been built," said Esperon, a former Armed Forces chief of staff.

But Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI, a former member of the government panel in peace talks with Moro rebel groups, said he was "90 percent" certain that a final peace agreement with the MILF would be signed this year.

75-25 sharing

Esperon said the two panels had also agreed that the jurisdiction and control of resources found within 15 kilometers from the shoreline would be with the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity.

"Beyond that, there will be joint control in the sharing of these critical resources, primarily fuel, oil and other such critical minerals," he said.

The sharing will be 75 percent for the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity and 25 percent for the government, he said.

As for land resources, Esperon said there were "existing arrangements," and pointed out that the ARMM had its own Department of Natural and Environment Resources.

Esperon said there should be "some unification" between the MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front

[MILF/p.6]

C. Mindanao folk want DPWH exec sacked

COTABATO CITY - Sectors displaced by the overflowing of the Rio Grande de Mindanao want President Arroyo to relieve the Central Mindanao director of the Department of Public Works and Highways, whose office is supposedly in charge of unclogging the river of water lilies and other debris.

Catholic radio station dxMS here said among those seeking the relief of DPWH regional director Usop Ali is Shariff Kabunsuan Rep. Didagen Dilangalen.

Ali could not be reached for comment.

More than 20,000 of Dilangalen's constituents in this city and the towns of Kabuntalan and Sultan Kudarat were forced to evacuate when the downstream channel here of the Rio Grande was clogged with some 200 tons of water lilies and silt, causing it to overflow and inundate low-lying areas.

Ranking members of the Islamic community here and in Shariff Kabunsuan said President Arroyo must also order an immediate overhaul of the DPWH regional office, which they blame for the flooding.

"This calamity should be an eye-opener for President Arroyo. The agency tasked to maintain the Rio Grande failed to perform its task religiously," an Egyptian-trained

[C. MINDANAO/p.7]

N. Cotabato official seeks thorough review of CARP extension measure

North Cotabato Vice Gov. Emmanuel F. Piñol has called for a "thorough review" of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) before its mandate is extended by Congress for another five years.

Addressing the European Commission-backed Support to Agrarian Reform Communities in Central Mindanao (STARCM) project during its closing ceremony at the provincial government's Capitol Rooftop in Kidapawan City, Piñol called on Congress to patch up the loopholes of the agrarian reform program before moving to pass the CARP extension bill or House Bill 4077.

"The agrarian reform program must take a new face and it can all be done if there is a thorough review. Even before Congress considers the extension of the program, there should be a thorough review," he stressed.

The CARP extension bill, which seeks a R100-billion budget for the extended agrarian reform program, also calls for the creation of a joint congressional oversight committee that will strictly review and monitor the entry force of the extended agrarian program.

"There should be a thorough review and reassessment

[N. COTABATO/p.5]

What caused the Maitum encounter?

MAITUM, Sarangani (MindaNews/26 June) – What really caused the encounter that led to the death of an Army soldier and a government militia, and the exodus of around 3,000 people to the evacuation centers here?

The Army and the Police who claimed they "liberated" the civilians of the four affected barangays from being "hostaged" by the armed group believed to be members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) considered the case as a "hostage-taking" by the armed group rumored to have planned an assault of the town's center.

Col. Gaudencio Pangilinan, commander of the 1002nd Army Brigade, said they "liberated" the civilians were "hostaged" in Maguling and in the boundary of Pinol.

The MILF blamed "war mongers" for the fierce half-day armed encounter between them and the government troopers that killed S/Sgt. Benly Rizano y Salazar, 35, of the Army's 27th IB and a Caggu member identified as Liloy Alisin.

Pangilinan said "we have two casualties. They probably have more."

At the evacuation centers, not one civilian could say why the encounter happened. They could only narrate what they saw and heard.

Benjamin Acosta, a teacher from the barangay of Mindupok who evacuated with his family at the town's gymnasium, said that at around 6 in the morning of Wednesday, he heard gunshots some 300 meters away from his residence.

He knew it was an encounter that involved the Army, but said he was not aware who were their opponents. He later learned that before the encounter at Mundupok, there were also armed clashes in neighboring barangays of Ticulab and Maguling.

"I could not tell why there was an encounter. I do not know what was the reason," Acosta said.

Remegio Rivac, the barangay chair of Maguling, said that around 10 armed men fired their guns on the air while requesting residents to get out of their respective residences.

"Out," Rivac quoted the armed men as saying. He said he thought they were soldiers but later realized they were not when he saw rifle-propelled grenades among the armed men. RPG has always been associated with the Moro rebel groups in Mindanao.

The commander of the armed group, which was later identified to be guerrillas of the MILF, reportedly told Rivac and his barangay councilors to gather their constituents at a nearby school so they would not be caught in a crossfire in the event they engaged the Army in an armed

[WHAT/p.5]

Ampatuan to sustain growth, focus peace drive for ARMM

SHARIFF AGUAK, Maguindanao – Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Gov. Datu Zaldy Uy Ampatuan vowed to push further the development momentum his administration has achieved in the past three years, stressing an intensified focus on peace efforts in his campaign for second term in the sixth ARMM elections on August 11, 2008.

Ampatuan expressed the pledge in their first political campaign cum caucus here on July 1.

Maguindanao Gov. Datu Andal Ampatuan, father of the ARMM top executive, organized the activity for his 22 constituent town mayors and their counterparts in Shariff Kabunsuan, but fellow reelectionist ARMM Vice Governor Ansaruddin Adiong brought in some municipal mayors from Lanao del Sur and attended the occasion.

President Arroyo and other stalwarts of the coalesced ruling Lakas and Kampi parties raised the hands of

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encounter.

Asked what was the message of the rebels, Rivac said: "They passed through to us their demand for the President to give them a separate state. They also complained about the rocketing prices of rice, fuel and basic commodities."

Rivac's statement was corroborated by Percy Aguna, who said that while they were given time to evacuate to a school, her 79-year-old mother, Cristina Aguna, was "trembling in fear upon hearing the rapid volume of fire."

At the evacuation center in Malalag Central Elementary School, the younger Aguna said in Ilocano: "My mother was trembling in fear but it was good we were given time to evacuate to the school where all other village folks were gathered."

Patrocenia Napela, 77, one of the many aged women at evacuation centers, said six families, all her relatives, first sought refuge in her residence as they failed to go to the nearby school before the encounter happened.

But Napela said that "a Muslim teacher came to take us out of our house and ushered us to the school."

Mayor Elsie Perrett said in a press statement that the "firefights broke out when heavily-armed men ambushed government troops who were on their way to a crime scene where a civilian volunteer was reportedly killed Wednesday morning by rebels in barangay Ticulab."

In a statement Wednesday night, Perrett said, "there is no truth to reports that a 6 x 6 truck full of soldiers was fired upon by a rocket-propelled grenade. This is based on the clarification of Army Capt. Patricio Tomales of the 1002nd Brigade based in Sarangani province. It is not also true that the rebels held hostage hundreds of residents in Mindupok."

Perrett described the displacement of civilians as "MILF-triggered evacuation" that happened just as the residents of the affected barangays returned home from evacuation after their villages were hit by flood brought about by typhoon Frank.

Police reports identified Ustadz Mursod as the commander of the MILF group that engaged the soldiers. Murshod was reportedly aided by Commanders Ting Jakiri, Dante, and Commander-511, all of the 104th Command of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces. (Romy B. Elusfa/MindaNews)

Ampatuan, Adiong and their slate for the 24 seats in the ARMM legislature on June 18 in Davao City where she assured the victory of the entire administration candidates in the August 11 polls.

"Siguradong sigurado na ang panalo ng ating mga kandidato," Mrs. Arroyo said in an overwhelming statement that made her the first President to have come to the field and openly ascertained the victory of candidates in ARMM, which is traditionally a pro-administration region.

The Chief Executive in her applauded remarks asked Ampatuan to focus efforts on peace and socioeconomic

[AMPATUAN/p.7]

N. COTABATO . . . from page 4

of the CARP and the new direction it would take in view of the lessons we have learned from the past," Piñol said.

The CARP, which was implemented in 1988 and was extended for another 10 years in 1998, is due to expire this month.

He bared there was a syndicate involved in the voluntary offer to sell the titles of land of the CARP beneficiaries, which he said, is rampant in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

"This is something that was subject of an investigation by the national agencies. We were surprised because nothing has come out of this," the vice governor said.

"This is actually one of the causes of the loss of lot of resources for support programs," he pointed out.

He lamented that most of the beneficiaries lost their land to this group of syndicate and often times, the land titles were given to "unqualified" beneficiaries.

Piñol said the agrarian reform program may be continued, but it has to adopt a new face.

"Let's do away with the system of counting the number of success stories by computing the number of hectares distributed because that's the wrong way of assessing the impact of the program on the lives of the farmers," he said.

He explained that the best barometer of success should always be the economic condition of the Filipino farmers.

"There should be a review of the concept of land ownership vis-a-vis our desire to improve the lives of farmers. Is the ownership of land really an assurance of improvement of lives?," he asked.

In the same forum, the European Union urged the Arroyo administration to prolong the life of CARP to help poor agrarian communities, particularly in the strife-torn southern Philippines.

Ambassador Alistair MacDonald, head of the European Commission delegation to the Philippines, said he is optimistic that Congress will immediately act on the CARP extension proposal once it resumes its session on July 28.

"Congress was not able to complete its work on this essential matter before it adjourned. But, we very much hope that this will be a key priority once the next session resumes," MacDonald said.

He said EU has been proud to contribute to peace and development in Mindanao.

"We stand ready to contribute further and I would encourage all stakeholders in the peace process to work for sustainable resolution of the conflict," MacDonald said. (By CHARISSA M. LUCI)

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(MNLF) regarding the issue on ancestral domain.

He declined to comment on how this could be attained.

The ARMM, composed of the provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Shariff Kabunsuan, was created after the Philippine government entered into a peace agreement with the MNLF.

Breakthrough

At informal talks in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday, the government and the MILF reached a breakthrough in efforts to resume the peace talks.

The two panels agreed to drop the word "freedom" in reaching a deal to create an ancestral homeland for Muslims in Mindanao, and settled for the phrase "aspiration of the Bangsamoro people."

In the earlier wording of the agreement, the MILF sought to "permanently address the aspirations of the Bangsamoro for freedom."

The unofficial, draft agreement will thus read: "The recognition and peaceful resolution of the conflict must involve consultations with the Bangsamoro people free of any imposition in order to provide chances of success and open new formulas that permanently respond to the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people."

Esperon said the wording on ancestral domain would be negotiated once the peace talks resume.

He said the word "freedom," which basically was about governance, was one of four contentious issues between the government and MILF panels in the peace talks.

He said the three other issues were jurisdiction and control of natural resources, the kind of organization to be established to "enable" the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity "to function efficiently," and "the matter of providing for a clause proposed by the Philippine side that all these agreements must conform with the Constitution ... or with the legal framework of the Philippines."

Big difference

Father Mercado, who now heads the peace advocacy group Kusog Mindanao, told radio station dxND in Kidapawan City that the agreement on the choice of words could spell a big difference in the peace talks.

But he warned that the agreement did not automatically resolve all the issues hounding the peace process with the MILF.

"The MOA on ancestral domain is not the comprehensive agreement, as what others [think]. It will only pave the way for the resumption of formal peace talks," Mercado said.

MILF civil-military affairs chief Eid Kabalu told Inquirer Mindanao on the phone that the separatist group was also optimistic about the signing of a final peace deal.

But he said this would depend on how fast the panels could agree on the issues pending resolution.

Still, Kabalu admitted that the Kuala Lumpur agreement resolved some of the stickiest issues that had been stalling the peace talks.

Possible federal state

Esperon said the new territory would cover a "considerable" land area.

If the residents agree to be included in the new territory through the plebiscite, their barangays or towns will comprise an expanded ARMM.

Esperon said the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity "would take a form more advanced than that of an autonomous region, and this could take the form of a federal state."

An amendment in the 1987 Constitution may also be necessary depending on "the provisions of the peace agreement," he said, adding:

"A federal state is not allowed within our current legal framework, and so if we go through that, then the agreement will not be executory until we have the enabling act which could come in the form of a constitution."

Interviewed over dzBB in Manila, President Arroyo gave thanks for the agreement made by the two panels in Kuala Lumpur.

"Yes, praise God, yes, praise God," she said.

She added that a peace deal could be concluded soon because the clashing views on ancestral domain had been resolved.

Ms Arroyo also said that "once a lasting peace is achieved in Mindanao, a speedy and lasting ... development will ensue."

She said that while certain areas in Mindanao were "very, very productive," some parts were "very, very deprived" because these were "torn by armed conflicts."

Resistance

In Kidapawan City, the provincial board of North Cotabato passed a resolution opposing the inclusion of the province in the proposed expanded ARMM.

In the resolution, the provincial board also authorized North Cotabato Gov. Jesus Sacdalan to file a case with the Supreme Court in the event the province is identified as part of the projected Moro territory.

"The people of North Cotabato already spoke in 2001 when they opposed the inclusion of the province in the ARMM," Vice Gov. Emmanuel Piñol said.

Piñol said North Cotabato's opposition was based on documents indicating that the province was one of the areas being considered for inclusion in the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity.

Moro assignment

Esperon said another important development in the peace process with the MILF was the appointment of a Moro

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development in his eventual reelection to office

The 40-year old Ampatuan renewed his commitment to pursue further the directive of the President, saying his nearly ending administration has given impetus to basic infrastructure projects implementation alongside the efforts on restoring peace in the 19-year old region.

He said his office has been actively supportive not only of the government peace negotiations with the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front but also in the settlement of family feuds or rido in ARMM.

Police authorities claim that family feuds, emanating mostly from political disputes, have compounded Moro rebellion problems in stunting the growth of ARMM.

At the same press conference, Ampatuan shrugged off any possible adverse effect on the holding of the ARMM elections by a pocket effort of a militant youth group campaigning for boycott of the political exercises.

"They (election dissenters) are entitled to their opinion... But it would be better for them to support the elections because the majority ARMM populace would decide whom to give mandate in the administration of the autonomous government," said the regional governor.

He said the coming elections, being the first computerized electoral process in the country, deserves participation from the public.

A successful conduct of the August 11 elections will help erode the unfavorable notion about the ARMM being the alleged electoral "cheating capital" of the country, he added. (Ali Macabalang, Manila Bulletin, July 4)

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preacher, who asked not to be identified, said in an open letter to local media outfits.

Residents in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have called on wealthy Islamic states to help bankroll the clearing and dredging of rivers here and nearby towns that overflowed recently and displaced some 30,000 Muslim villagers.

Two adjoining bridges connecting communities traversed by a century-old road linking Midsayap town in North Cotabato and Datu Piang in Maguindanao collapsed last week due to 400 tons of water lilies that had tangled with their columns.

"We need help from Islamic countries that are financially capable to help fund the clearing of these rivers. The government alone cannot solve these problems all by itself," Datu Piang Mayor Samer Uy said in the Maguindanao dialect.

Uy said the P300-million Sajid Piang Bridge connecting Datu Piang and Midsayap might collapse, too, if the water lilies that have accumulated under it cannot be removed in 30 days.

Uy said ARMM Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan has been trying his best to address the problem with his limited

EVACUEE . . . from page 3

since Wednesday, has been spending most of his time at the evacuation centers, said the incident has "developed hatred in some people but we in the church shall really try to put in place a mechanism that will help our people in the process of healing."

The Joint Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities of the government and the MILF, accompanied by the Bantay Ceasefire and the International Monitoring Team (IMT), came to "reposition" the Army and MILF forces away from each other to allow "a respectable distance that would not make them fire their guns at each other because they are at shooting distance."

Rexall Kaalim, coordinator of Bantay Ceasefire, said that after the troops are repositioned, "we may put up a buffer force between the them. But this has yet to be agreed upon by the government and the MILF."

In areas where there were similar fighting in the past, the government, MILF, IMT, and Bantay Ceasefire organized Joint Monitoring Action Teams which, on a 24/7 basis served as buffer force between the soldiers and guerrillas. (Romy B. Elusfa/MindaNews)

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as head of the government team in the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG), a body formed by the government and the MILF to address the prevalence of organized crime in Mindanao.

Brig. Gen. Muhammad Nur Askalani replaced Brig. Gen. Ben Dolorfino, the Marine Corps chief, in the AHJAG.

"I know he can handle this job well, knowing his experience," Dolorfino said of his successor, who is also deputy commander of the military's Western Mindanao Command.

Said Esperon: "Askalani is the first Tausug to become a general in the Philippine Army, and with his vast experience in Mindanao, I have no doubt that he can perform well for the Bangsamoro people."

Askalani hails from the fishing village of Lugus Island in Sulu, a depressed province in the ARMM, which has been always known as the hotbed of the Moro rebellion. (Downloaded from www.inquirer.net -- By Nikko Dizon, *Inquirer Mindanao Philippine Daily Inquirer* (07/18/2008) With reports from Julie S. Alipala, Edwin O. Fernandez and Dennis Jay C. Santos, *Inquirer Mindanao*; Michael Lim Ubac in *Manila*)

fiscal capability.

Ampatuan said he has tasked his public works secretary, Hadji Razul Abpi, to assess the condition of the Sajid Piang Bridge and prepare a report for President Arroyo so she can also help address the problem.

Inspectors found a three-inch crack at the center of the bridge, which is being pushed away from its location by 12 hectares of water lilies that have rammed against its columns.[]

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Claim," for his law degree from the Manuel L. Quezon University.

On behalf of the heirs, Ulama wrote President Macapagal-Arroyo in 2003 through then Foreign Secretary Blas Ople, seeking assistance in requesting the Malaysian government to increase the rental "consistent with the gigantic improvements of its 29,388-square-mile land area and its enormous increase in income..."

(According to a brief on Sabah posted on its website, the gross national product of this resource-rich state grew from RM400 million in 1963 to RM12.1 billion in 1993.)

Ulama's first letter merited a reply seven months later, from Ambassador Leonides Caday of the Department of Foreign Affairs' Office of the Undersecretary for Special Concerns.

Caday gave the assurance that the matter would be discussed "as soon as BELACS (Bipartisan Executive-Legislative Advisory Council on the Sabah issue) convenes."

But nothing more was heard from the DFA, prompting Ulama to write Ms Arroyo again on May 5, 2008, requesting her to formally endorse to the Malaysian government the heirs' proprietary rights claim.

On May 29, Ulama received a phone call from Caday, who asked him to submit documents to support his request. He also received a reply on June 23, this time from Foreign Undersecretary Rafael Seguis.

Ultimate solution

Ulama said the late Princess Dinchurain Kiram, daughter of Princess Tarhata, had made a similar appeal in letters to the Malaysian government, to no avail.

In a letter she wrote in 1999 to then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad through then President Joseph Estrada, she said "([t]he complete settlement of the proprietary rights of the heirs of the Sultan of Sulu by the Malaysian government is the only real and meaningful ultimate solution to the peace and order problems of the Southern Philippines, which will eventually bring peace, progress and happiness to the people in the area."

She also said "the money value and improvements of Sabah [since] 118 years ago ... to the present has gone over a thousandfold."

Claim revival

"Fair human dealings, justice and fairness demand that the annual customary payment ... must be increased retroactive to the year 1962, at the time the British government left the administration of Sabah in favor of Malaysia," she said.

Moro National Liberation Front Chair Nur Misuari called for a revival of the Sabah claim during a gathering of the MNLF in Davao City on May 24.

Present at the gathering was Sultan Muhammad Fuad Abdullah Kiram, the fourth son of Sultan Esmail Kiram,

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hundreds were displaced in Maitum, Sarangani when MILF forces swooped down on the area.

On June 30, a farmer was injured in Barangay Malamote, Matalam town. On July 1, an unidentified farmer was killed when suspected members of the MILF clashed with elements of the Army's 40th Infantry Battalion in sitio Tugal, barangay Pagangan-Uno in Aleosan, North Cotabato.

Iqbal said "the serious provocation is coming from the government by dilly-dallying, not complying with the signed documents... We will look deeply into the larger picture," he said.

Iqbal said they were "on our way home from Kuala Lumpur."

"We submitted our reply to the GRP draft," he said. Only the MILF panel representatives went to Kuala Lumpur. (Carolyn O. Arguillas/MindaNews)

who was one of the nine heirs recognized in the Makaskie Decision of the High Court of North Borneo affirming their proprietary rights over Sabah.

Sultan Fuad, who claims he was proclaimed Sultan of Sabah in 2004 and Sultan of Sulu in 2006, is backed by the MNLF.

After their father's death in 1973, Fuad's elder brother Mahakuttah was proclaimed sultan with the full support of President Ferdinand Marcos.

Mahakuttah died in 1986, the same year Marcos was ousted.

Ulama dismissed as "lies" a recent report in a Malaysian newspaper saying that the nine heirs of the Sulu Sultanate were dropping their claim to Sabah.

According to Ulama, no one has the power and authority to drop the claim because there is no sultan reigning over the territory and ruling with a government.

Last sultan

The last Sultan of Sulu was Jamalul Kiram II—the second son of Jamalul Ahlam Kiram who leased Sabah to Gustav von Baron de Overbeck and Alfred Dent of East India Co. He reigned from 1893 up to his death on June 7, 1936.

Ulama said a careful reading of the judgment of Chief Justice CFC Makaskie of the High Court of North Borneo would show that nobody could claim or relinquish the sovereign or proprietary claims to Sabah except the nine heirs of Jamalul Kiram II.

Now that all the original heirs recognized in the Makaskie Decision are dead, it is up to the legal administrators of the nine heirs named in the decision to act in the best interest of the people of Sabah, Ulama said.

"Give to the heirs and the people of Sulu what is fair and just, even if sovereignty should remain with Malaysia," he said. (By Noralyn Mustafa, Philippine Daily Inquirer)

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Plan, which was introduced by the his administration in 1994.

Ramos pointed out that "Everybody who's a stakeholder here has a role to play. We have a benchmark to achieve. We should never lose sight of our target. We should focus more on sustainability, peace, and progress in Mindanao".

During the said launching, Usec. Virgilio Leyretana, Sr., MEDCo chairman, pointed out that "various policy reforms, programs, and projects for Mindanao's development have been implemented because of Mindanao 2000."

Leyretana cited reforms such as the integration of its fragmented economy in the 70's and 80's; the shift from the low budget to the increased budget allocation for Mindanao's infrastructure; and the change from being the country's backdoor to being its front door to the East Asean Growth Area.

"In recent years, however, new challenges and opportunities have been cropping up, leading to the call for an integrated peace and development roadmap which is more in tune with the present and future global context of Mindanao," Leyretana said.

Various stakeholders who attended the ceremonial launching of the Mindanao 2020 welcomed the move.

"It's a historic event, because it will define the direction of where Mindanao will be in 2020. It is very important because Mindanao cannot afford to waver in its efforts. The plan must be put in place for governors and future local policy makers," said South Cotabato Governor Daisy Fuentes, President of the Confederation of Provincial Governors, City Mayors & Municipal Mayors League Presidents of Mindanao.[]

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Mindanao (ARMM).

In negotiating the safe release of kidnap victims and war captives, Legarda had dealt both with plain bandits and ideologues, including those who captured then Major Noel Buan.

In the case of broadcast journalist Arlyn dela Cruz who was held for three months by the Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao, Legarda said she banked on her experience in covering the region and its people in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was Maria Ressa and Charie Villa on behalf of ABS-CBN who asked Legarda to negotiate the release of the TV crew.

A broadcast journalist herself before joining the Senate in 1998, Legarda recalled that in the 80s and 90s, journalists like her covered Mindanao as marines secured their safety.

MILF . . . from page 12

process with the MILF is very much alive and "is moving."

"There have lately been exchanges of proposals and counter-proposals on the issues concerning how we can reach a final peace settlement," Esperon said.

He said back-channel talks are in progress in preparation for the resumption of formal talks. He did not set a date for the formal negotiations.

Military prepared

The military leadership ordered the deployment of 24 armored personnel carriers to Mindanao in response to MILF's pronouncement that it is prepared for armed hostilities.

"Although there is noise going on in Central Mindanao and other parts of Mindanao, we feel that they are trying to get the attention of the public and maybe the government towards the peace process that is temporarily stalled at this moment," Armed Forces chief Alexander Yano said.

Yano said that while the AFP doubts the seriousness of MILF's bellicose statement, it would not allow any group to threaten peace in any part of the country.

"I have ordered the AFP to be vigilant and take appropriate actions while upholding the primacy of the peace process to protect the people against those who disrupt the peace," Yano declared.

He said the military in Central Mindanao is capable of containing the MILF and helping develop the region.

Describing the MILF as a loose organization, Yano blamed the secessionist group for 40 atrocities from May to June.

The atrocities include raids on transmission towers and power generating facilities.

"While I reiterate the primacy of the peace process even in the light of increasing attacks by the MILF, we shall maintain an active defense posture, consistent with our non-negotiable mandate to preserve peace," he said.

He said that even MILF chair Al Haj Murad declared that recent attacks staged by some MILF commanders were not sanctioned by the rebel group's leadership. (By Edith Regalado and Jaime Laude, Thursday, July 10, 2008)

She said that the marines would turn them over to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) if they needed to interview officials like then MNLF chair Nur Misuari.

"The MNLF was responsible for our safety once we were turned over to them by the marines," she recalled.

The senator said the police and the Department of Justice must file the appropriate charges against the kidnapers, whoever they may be, so justice may be afforded the victims.

Legarda lamented that many of the kidnapers of Drilon's group were said to be minors brandishing high-powered arms instead of pens, papers, and books.

"Those kids should be in school instead of roaming the countryside kidnapping people. That's a sad statement on the state of Mindanao, and the neglect and apathy of the rest of the nation on the region."

SOME . . . from page 1

Support to Agrarian Reform Communities in Central Mindanao (STARCM) project.

MacDonald said the kidnapping incident “makes people aware of the fact that there are problems of law and order, and problems of security in Mindanao, and certainly that is not a good image to be presented.”

“When you have incidents like that, it certainly doesn’t improve the image of the country and it gives a negative image. But I don’t think that one incident will change the country’s image in one direction or another,” he also said.

Asked if he is wary of the security situation in this province, he said: “This is my eighth time that I’ve been in Mindanao this year.”

Brinks said Tacurong City, which is a two-hour ride from the General Santos City, is “completely safe.”

The abduction “was only on the island of Sulu, and we’re on the island of Mindanao. So, I feel safe. I have no hesitation being here,” the ambassador said.

Brinks said he is set to visit Mindanao again in February next year.

Asked if the hostage crisis sends wrong signal to the international community, he said: “It doesn’t change much. The problem is if you’re not living in the country and you hear far away the Philippines abduction in Southern Philippines. It, sort of, confirms a certain perception. It will not change the travel advice which most of us have. It will not increase the warnings, and it will not decrease the areas where we say that it isn’t safe to travel.”

MacDonald expressed hope that the STARCM project will be maintained and sustained with the leadership of the mayors, local government units, and the active participation of the agrarian communities themselves.

“I am very pleased with the results. And I just want to thank everybody concerned for producing a good result,” he said.

He said the project has a major impact on poverty reduction and on enhancing agricultural productivity and off-farm employment of the agrarian communities.

STARCM has funded more than R414 million worth of sub-projects and activities in North Cotabato, with R313 million as grant from EU and R101 million as counterpart from local government units and people’s organizations. The sub-projects benefited more than 15,800 households in 17 municipalities of the province.

In Sultan Kudarat, sub-projects and activities costing R159 million were funded, and R119 million of the amount was provided by EC.

The overall objective of STARCM is to increase the self-reliance, living standard and quality of life for

EXTENSION . . . from page 1

of the IMT in 2004, clashes between the Philippine government and the MILF forces were as high as 559 ceasefire-related incidents. The year of the arrival of the IMT, ceasefire related incidents lowered to 15. As of 2007, there were only seven ceasefire-related incidents.

Esperon stated in a release that from 41 peace monitors last May, there are now 29 international monitors of the Mindanao peace process, primarily composed of military and police officers from Malaysia with 12, Libya with six, and Brunei with 10. At least one socio-economic expert from Japan was remained with the team.

Esperon during the Regional Peace and Order Council at Kidapawan Monday said the possible entry of Singaporeans and Saudi Arabians in an extended IMT, aside from possible additional Malaysian, Libyan, Brunei, and Japanese contingents if the team composition is renewed.

In an OPAPP release, Esperon said, “we might also see the participation of Singapore and Saudi Arabia, not necessarily military contingents, but these matters will have to be discussed between the two panels (of the national government and the MILF) if the IMT will be recomposed”.

He highlighted the successes of the government Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities under Brig. Gen. Rey Sealana, the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group under Maj. Gen. Nur Askalani, and civil society groups such as the Mindanao Peace Weavers and the Bantay Ceasefire in the local monitoring of the peace process.

“We are a few strides away from the finish line, so to speak, on the Ancestral Domain aspect,” Sec. Esperon added. “We firmly assert the primacy of the peace process on the ground”, the OPAPP release said. (By MIKE GUIMBATAN JR, www.mb.com.ph, July 17, 2008)

farming households in 50 agrarian reform communities in Sultan Kudarat, North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur.

Following the successful completion of its STARCM project, EU will continue to work for the Mindanao Health Sector Policy Support Programme (MHSPSP). It will also contribute to the World Bank-administered Mindanao Trust Fund (MTF). The EU is the largest donor for MTF, with contributions of one million euros from Sweden and two million euros from EC.

“Without full and sustainable peace in Mindanao, there will be no prosperity,” MacDonald said.

ESPERON . . . from page 1

peace talks with the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF).

"Another short-term program probably is to realize our talks with the Partido Manggagawa in Mindanao. We are looking at the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP)-MILF peace talks. Another long-term project that we have which we will be launching with the President is the restarting of the social integration on June 18 in Davao," Esperon said, adding that Secretary Jesus Dureza has put so much effort to make the peace process move.

A member of the GRP panel, retired Gen. Rudy Garcia, said one year would be too long for the final peace agreement with MILF to be realized.

"I think the certain domain of the memorandum of agreement with the MILF is reachable, and the accord I believe, I am confident, will be reached before August. But, first we have to clear some procedural matters here," Garcia said.

He said the GRP has its own proposals to be presented before the Cabinet members and the President to address the last remaining points with the MILF peace panel.

Garcia said they used the Constitution as a "yardstick" to address the various contentious points raised during the GRP-MILF peace panel meetings.

"So we have plotted these contentious points vis-à-vis the Constitution and we know that there are some contentious points. That is in essence what we did. That would be part of the consensus but it is internal to the government and the MILF," Garcia said.

In the case of the CPP-NDF, the peace talks have been stalled for more than two years already but Esperon expressed optimism that the negotiations could be restarted.

"In fact we've never closed any door on them and so it would be a great achievement if we could restart the talks within the terms that we should have to agree on," he said.

The peace talks between the government and the CPP-NDF bogged down when the United States and European Union placed the CPP and the NPA in their lists of foreign terrorist organizations.

As peace adviser, Esperon said he would not push too hard for the three-year ceasefire agreement that he proposed when he was still chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

"As OPAPP (head), I will not be very firm on the three-year ceasefire; after all there's a need to consult the other members. If there's a way, then we'd like to reopen the talks. But there are some conditions that we have to observe so it's not just my game here, this is a collective

effort," he added.

"On the long term we have several things we must never fail to do and one of these is seeing to it peace agreements we have entered into shall benefit us and shall be fulfilled," he said.

Police matter

Commenting on the Drilon kidnapping, Esperon said the incident is purely a police matter that must be left to the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the crisis management team created earlier by the President.

"As of now we are leaving the matter to the crisis management group and it is a matter that should be addressed by law enforcement agencies," Esperon said.

He added that the AFP is also conducting its normal operations against the rebel groups.

"At this point, I don't think the incident is affecting the peace process. It is largely a police matter. It should be addressed by the cited agency. In fact, even (Interior) Secretary (Ronaldo) Puno and (police chief) General (Avelino) Razon are now in the area. It is a case of kidnapping, abduction. Nevertheless, of course, I want to know, having been a chief of staff," Esperon said.

He said he has been in contact with many people in Mindanao, but he refused to divulge any details.

"We have to be very careful about it because there are lives that could be in danger. This is not a news blackout, but I just want to keep the information that we have in the meantime to ensure that Ces and her cameraman will be in a better situation, so forgive me for not spilling out what I know," he said.

The former AFP top brass said he already provided all the information that he has to the crisis management group handling Drilon's case.

According to him, reports that the MILF are coddling the Abu Sayyaf are not verified.

Dureza, on the other hand, said coddling criminal elements has not been a part of their peace negotiations with the MILF.

'Not qualified'

Left-wing organizations, on the other hand, have slammed Esperon's appointment, pointing out that on his watch scores of leftist activists were murdered in what many view as a "dirty war" against the Left.

The United Nations has said the military was responsible for many of the killings.

"His record as military chief shows nothing that qualifies him as a peace adviser," said Beverly Musni, a lawyer and leader of a peace advocate group in Mindanao.

"The people remember it was Esperon who vowed to crush the insurgency by 2010. As a military man, he has relentlessly pursued war as a solution to the country's armed conflict," Musni said. - (By Jose Rodel Clapano, Marvin Sy, www.philstar.com)

Former President Ramos supports Mindanao peace plan



POST-HARVEST FACILITY --- A Maranaw woman fills a jute sack with palay grains dried on a solar dryer built for a farming village in Masiu, Lanao del Sur by the ARMM Social Fund Project, which has dozens of socio-economic projects in Muslim communities bankrolled by the World Bank and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation.[]

Sabah claim far from being resolved

THE SO-CALLED “cession monies” being paid yearly by the Malaysian government to the heirs of the last Sultan of Sulu may qualify for Ripley’s “Believe It or Not.”

Ulka Ulama, the heirs’ legal counsel for the past 40 years, said the yearly rental for Sabah that was fixed in the original lease contract 130 years ago at 5,000 Mexican dollars had remained the same, except that the currency had changed to the Malaysian ringgit (RM).

The amount—RM5,000 or P70,000—has not only defied inflation for over a century but is also probably the cheapest rent ever in the world.

Ulama, who collects the rental payments on the heirs’ behalf, said it was his personal view that the Malaysian government should consider the long-overdue increment in the rental rate.

The heirs have long been seeking an increase in the annual rental from the Malaysian government. Even the Philippine government has ignored their request for help in resolving the matter.

Letters

Ulama came to know the royal heirs in 1959, when he interviewed them for his thesis, “The North Borneo

[**SABAH**/p.8]

DAVAO CITY – Mindanao still has better chances for development among other comparative regions in the Philippines due to its assets, social mix, and location in the trade and investment zone right in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. However, Mindanao needs a continued, prolonged plan for unity, solidarity, and purpose in nation-building.

This was declared by former President Fidel V. Ramos in the ceremonial launching of the formulation of the Mindanao 2020 Plan for Peace and Development, to a multi-stakeholder audience yesterday here at the Conference Room of the Mindanao Economic Development Council (MEDCo).

“The nation is not built on one term; nation-building takes two generations. It is important to build on the gains of everybody before us. That is the way the nation should be built,” Ramos asserted, in reference to the launching of the formulation of the Mindanao 2020, which will serve as an updated version of the Mindanao 2000 Development Framework Plan, or the Mindanao 2000 Development

[**FORMER**/p.9]

MILF not keen on getting Brunei to mediate in peace talks

DAVAO CITY – The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is satisfied with Malaysia’s performance as mediator in the peace negotiations with the Philippine government and is not keen on letting Brunei take over the task as proposed by a major political party in the oil-rich sultanate.

“The Malaysian facilitation is excellent. We do not see any reason why it should not continue,” Muhammed Ameen, chair of the MILF secretariat, said in the MILF’s website luwaran.com.

Yasin Affandy, president of Brunei’s National Development Party, was earlier reported to have broached the idea of allowing Brunei to sponsor the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF.

“With all our hearts and souls, we salute you for your brotherly concerns and due regard to peace and justice in our lands,” Ameen told the Brunei party leaders in the statement.

Meanwhile, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon Jr. said the peace

[**MILF**/p.9]