



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

PRESS RELEASE

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PUNO: FINAL PEACE AGREEMENT WITH MILF POSSIBLE ON PGMA WATCH

Secretary Ronnie Puno of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) remains hopeful that a final peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is still possible before the term of President Arroyo ends in 2010, saying the government is ready to resume talks with Islamic rebels without any precondition.

Puno noted though that the "minimum desired result" that the government is targeting right now is the restoration of peace and order in conflict areas in Mindanao through a "true and effective" ceasefire properly monitored by the International Monitoring Team (IMT) to stop the MILF from committing crimes and acts of violence in the South.

"We want full dedication on both sides on commitment to peace and order," Puno said in a recent media forum.

"If we could at least get to the stage when we are talking instead of fighting. If the status quo is observed and nobody moves we can at least move forward," Puno said. A final agreement to me is not impossible. It depends on the determination of both parties."

Puno said the initiatives being done by the government to help jumpstart the peace process shows "we are very much interested in seeing a final resolution to the problem" in Mindanao before the term of President Arroyo ends in 2010.

Among such initiatives, Puno said, is the Philippines' continuing bid to gain observer status before the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

He said that gaining observer status with the OIC will allow the Philippines to ask the pan-Islamic organization to ensure the compliance of their fellow Muslims with the agreements it has forged with other parties and seek the support of other Islamic nations for the peace process.

"We feel that the ball is not in our court right now," Puno said on the stalled peace negotiations with the MILF. "We have reconstituted our peace panel and it is waiting to resume negotiations. We have been continuing informal negotiations with the MILF leadership and the talks continue even on an informal basis. We have been wanting to resume talks unconditionally but the MILF has been placing certain conditions."

“But we don’t believe that it’s a matter for us to decide on a bilateral basis because the discussions will never end. So we are really looking for some participation from the Islamic Conference on this,” Puno added.

OIC has 57 member-states and five observer-states, along with five others with observer status from international organizations, including the United Nations and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The Philippine government has been applying for observer status with the OIC for more than 10 years now.

Puno said that with the revision of the rules for observer status under the new OIC charter, the Philippines is now hopeful that the approval of its bid “is now possible.”

He likewise noted that Syrian President Bashar Al Assad had assured President Arroyo of the country’s support for the Philippines’ bid before the OIC.

Egypt has also endorsed the Philippines’ bid for OIC observer status.

Syria and Egypt will also be part of the IMT that has been monitoring in Mindanao the implementation of the ceasefire agreement signed by the Philippine government with the MILF in 2001.

The IMT is currently composed of peace keepers from Malaysia, Brunei, Libya, Canada, and Japan. The Malaysians, who withdrew from the IMT, had made up 41 of the 60-man team. Malaysia was also a broker of the peace negotiations between the government and the MILF.

Puno said that “Malaysia has expressed its interest to again be part of the IMT.”