

GRP, MILF sign agreement to involve interested countries and int'l NGOs in peace process

Contributed by Carolyn O. Arguillas / MindaNews
Wednesday, 16 September 2009 00:21

DAVAO CITY (MindaNews/15 September) — The government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panels signed at 10 p.m. Tuesday in Kuala Lumpur a framework agreement on the formation of the International Contact Group (ICG), in recognition of the role that interested countries and international non-government organizations (INGO) can play in the peace process.

According to the agreement, the ICG will consist of "interested countries accompanying the peace process preferably drawn from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the European Union (EU) as well as accredited INGO(s) to be invited by the Parties in consultation with the Third Party Facilitator."

The agreement "on the establishment of International Contact Group (ICG) of groups of states and non-state organizations to accompany and mobilize international support for the peace process" was among four things the two peace panels agreed to do during the meeting in Kuala Lumpur on July 28 and 29, the meeting that ended the year-long impasse after the controversial aborted signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). The three other things the two panels agreed to do in July were:

- sustain both the Government's Suspension of Military Offensives (SOMO) and the MILF's Suspension of Military Actions (SOMA);
- acknowledgment of MOA-AD as an unsigned and yet initialed document, and commitment by both parties to reframe the consensus points with the end in view of moving towards the comprehensive compact to bring about a negotiated political settlement; and
- work for a framework agreement on the establishment of a mechanism on the protection of non-combatants in armed conflict.

Peace Process Assistant Secretary Camilo Montesa, government peace panel spokesperson, quoted Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Rafael E. Seguis, chair of the government peace panel, as saying that "the engagement of the ICG is a major breakthrough in the pursuit for a durable peace in Mindanao and hopes that this will now pave the way for the formal resumption of the Talks."

Montesa told MindaNews by phone that the negotiation for the ICG was "tough but in the end, the paramount interest of securing a peaceful and bright future for the people of Mindanao triumphed and was affirmed by the parties." MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal told MindaNews by phone that they had "just signed the framework on ICG and talks are still ongoing on civilian protection."

The ICG, according to the framework agreement, is "ad-hoc in nature and issue-specific in its engagement consistent with an international dimension in aid of the consensus that will effectively enable them to exert proper leverage and to sustain the interest of the Parties as well as maintain a level of comfort that restores mutual trust." It will draw its mandate from the negotiating panels and the Third Party Facilitation which, according to Montesa, will remain to be done by Malaysia. The ICG shall coordinate and work closely with the Facilitator. Coordination between the ICG and the Facilitator will be carried out by the representative designated by the former.

According to the Agreement, the ICG will perform the following functions: - To attend and observe the face-to-face negotiations upon invitation by the Parties with the concurrence of the Facilitator; - To conduct visits, exchange views, and give advice on discreet basis in coordination with the Parties and the Facilitator; - To seek out the assistance of recognized experts, resource persons or groups on specific issues in order to support the Parties; and - To meet upon request by any of the Parties at various levels to help resolve substantive issues based on agreed agenda. The ICG is also tasked to "invite and engage the OIC, the EU and eminent persons to participate in its activities." "Mindful of the interests of the stakeholders to benefit from and expect significant peace dividends from the ICG mission, the Parties will designate INGOs that will be accredited along with their named local NGO partners," the Framework Agreement stated. In relation to the functions of the ICG, the INGO, it said, will perform the following roles: - To engage and act as a bridge between the Parties, ICG, Facilitator and their local partners and civil society in support of the peace process; - To exchange views, provide research inputs, give feedback and advice to the Parties in coordination with the Facilitator; and - To establish communication channels in furtherance of peace process advocacy. The framework agreement's "confidentiality clause" states that "All information, data or opinion generated or exchanged in connection with the work of the ICG shall be strictly privileged and confidential."

The two parties also agreed to "extend the applicability of the GRP-MILF Agreement on Safety and Security Guarantees dated March 9, 2000 to the ICG herein set up." The framework agreement, which takes effect on the date of signing (September 15), "shall be subject to revision upon signing of the Comprehensive Compact to extend the function and role of the ICG in the implementation phase."

The framework agreement was signed by Seguis for the government, Iqbal for the MILF and Datuk Othman bin Abdul Razak, the Malaysian facilitator. (Carolyn O. Arguillas/MindaNews)