

**ASEAN-ISIS
23rd ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE (APR)
SHERATON IMPERIAL KUALA LUMPUR HOTEL,
KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA
1 – 4 June 2009**

***“Addressing Insurgency and Militancy in the Philippines:
Thinking Out of the Box”***

**A paper presented by SECRETARY JESUS G. DUREZA
Chief Presidential Legal Counsel and former
Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process
Republic of the Philippines**

Introduction

Honored Guests, Distinguished Speakers and Presentors, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is an honor for me to represent the Philippines to this yet another milestone gathering of key government and private sector leaders, policy advocates, and key movers from the academe and media across the Asia-Pacific to discuss current issues and realities that shape the future of our nations.

The Philippine Peace Process: A continuing quest for national transformation

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The Philippine Government's overall peace policy framework stretches far beyond seeking an end to internal armed conflicts. Just as importantly, it endeavors to address the root causes that have spawned decades of armed struggle and social unrest.

In broader terms, it pushes for the transformation of Philippine society into one characterized by justice, tolerance, pluralism and full respect for human rights.

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The Philippines has been plagued by insurgencies throughout the history. Defined as an organized movement aimed to overthrow a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict, insurgency is said to be a form of modern warfare. Differences in ideology and faith, problems of underdevelopment and poverty, and social dissatisfaction are some of the main issues that have given birth to insurrections in the country.

The longest running insurgencies in the country are being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines - New People's Army (CPP-NPA) and the Southern Philippines Secessionist Movement particularly the Moro Islamic Liberation Front operating in Mindanao.

Though the Government has greatly diminished the numbers and arms of insurgent groups through successful military campaigns, uprisings have not been completely eradicated. Both insurgent groups continue to operate and engage in criminal and terrorist activities that threaten the country's internal security and hamper nation building.

However, in spite of major challenges the Government is facing, it continues to engage with the said insurgent groups in tedious peace process, instead of waging an ugly all-out war.

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National Peace Agenda

Under a comprehensive peace agenda put forward by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo immediately upon assumption in office in February 2001, the government framework for peace that is primarily aimed towards the attainment of a just, comprehensive and enduring peace under the rule of law and in accordance with constitutional processes. In particular, it sought to prevent and resolve internal armed conflicts and social unrests as well as their root causes through the pursuit of a comprehensive peace process.

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Current Updates in the Peace Process

Allow me to present some recent developments in our continuing and determined effort to: Addressing the Communist Insurgency; pursue peace process with MILF; and carry-out initiatives to achieve long-term peace and development.

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The Communist Insurgency

The communist insurgency in the Philippines can be traced to the peasant rebellions during the late 19th century up to the early 20th century. Rural revolts among peasants became common at the time due to issues on land tenancy and growing population pressures. The agrarian unrest continued until the 1950s, covering mostly Central Luzon and Visayas, which spurred the armed struggle of the combined forces of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), established in 1930, and the HUKBALAHAP war guerillas. The rebellion declined in the 1950s but residuals of the old HUK Army played significant roles in the establishment of the New People's Army.

Internal rupture due to ideological differences and party leadership rivalries within the PKP resulted in the establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The organization was founded in 1968 by Jose Maria Sison and other young revolutionaries in Central Luzon. Like Sison, most members of the political group were educated youths from the middle class who were disgruntled with the government. The CPP's ideology was largely drawn from the Chinese communism of Mao Zedong and its model agrarian revolution, unlike the Soviet-oriented PKP. Sison and his cadres criticized the subservient policy of the Philippines to the United States, describing the country as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial society ruthlessly exploited by United States imperialists, the comprador big bourgeoisie, landlords, and bureaucratic capitalists. Armed revolution was regarded as the only way to overthrow the United States-sponsored government, free the people from their oppression, and institute a people's democratic revolution. The Party sought to promote their ideology by exploiting several issues such as inadequacies of the agrarian reform; unemployment and poor economic conditions, social injustice; and lack of government credibility due to corruption and abuses.

The CPP encountered a main problem after its inception it promoted a peasant-led revolution and the party had no peasant base and no knowledge in guerilla warfare. The problem was solved after a few months when the party found an ally in Bernabe Buscayno. Buscayno, better known as Kumander Dante commanded a group of peasant guerillas, which emerged from the past PKP-HUK actions in the late 1960s. Convinced by the party's ideological zeal, Buscayno submitted under the leadership of the Party. Hence, the CPP-New People's Army was born. The CPP-NPA operations concentrated on the agrarian reform in the rural areas. The group engaged in conduct of various atrocities which are not limited to extortion of revolutionary taxes and bombing of vital establishments in different areas, to advance their causes.

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CPP-NPA: A Declining Force

The NPA strength posed a net decrease of 3% or 522 personnel from 5,761 in 2007 to 5,239 due to the neutralization, desertion and laying-low of 1,190 of insurgents particularly in Northern Luzon Command (NOLCOM), Southern Luzon Command (SOLCOM), Central Command in the Visayas (CENTCOM) and Eastern Mindanao Command (EASTMINCOM) Areas.

The NPA firearms posted a net decrease of 28% or 301 firearms from 5,694 to 5,390 due to the deletion of 749 firearms from the OB mostly through ISO recovery works particularly in SOLCOM, EASTMINCOM, CENTCOM and NOLCOM areas as well as the inclusion of 445 firearms as a result of guerilla and “agaw-armas” operations mostly in EASTMINCOM and SOLCOM AOR.

The NPA affected barangays posted a net decrease of 28% or 538 barangays from 1,918 in 2007 to 1,391 in 2008. There are only 347 influenced barangays while less influenced barangays numbers to 1,034. The net decrease is attributed to the clearing and deletion of 694 affected barangays mostly through SOT operations in all NOLCOM, SOLCOM, CENTCOM, and WESTMINCOM areas. 156 barangays mostly in SOLCOM and EASTMINCOM areas were included, 138 were newly validated and 18 barangays were recovered by the NPA due to the absence of stay-behind forces and lack of government development projects. Aside from the affected barangays, there are 5,188 barangays validated as threatened barangays.

In terms of guerilla fronts, there has been a 29% decrease or 25 fronts from 87 to 52 as a result of the dismantling 11 fronts, downgrading 15 others and reactivation of 1 front

Based on this figures we can say that the CPP-NPA is a declining force in the Philippines. The downtrend in the CPP-NPA from the year 2002 to 2008 was greatly influenced by the intensified government effort through the Bantay Laya Programs, a set of military operation aimed at dismantling guerilla fronts and decreasing the CPP-NPA influence in both rural and urban areas.

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Peace process with CPP-NPA-NDF

The negotiations between the GRP and the NDF has been suspended since August 2004 due to the NDF's unilateral withdrawal from the peace negotiations in

light of the renewed listing by the US and the EU of the CPP/NPA and Mr. Sison in their terrorist lists. With the suspension of the talks, the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) also remains suspended.

The talks were to discuss three remaining agenda items, with the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Law (CARHRIHL) in 1998. These are: (i) social and economic reforms; (ii) political and constitutional reforms; and, (iii) end of hostilities and disposition of forces.

However, in spite of the impasse, the Government remains open to negotiate with said group and continues to fulfill its obligations under the CARHRIHL as one of the parallel levels of engagement.

These include conduct of Basic Orientation Seminar Workshops on CARHRIHL for the AFP and the PNP to reinforce their basic understanding of HR and IHL in the context of the peace process and to make them partners in monitoring HR violations. Twenty three (23) workshops were conducted for the PNP while five (5) were conducted for the AFP.

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At the same time, the Government is pursuing complementary and parallel tracks of peaceful engagement to advance the peace process with the CNN. These include:

Continuous link up with the Royal Norwegian Government facilitation team to ensure its sustained and active role in the peace process. In line with this, the Panel held three meetings with said facilitation team to exchange of updates on the developments in the talks as well as to discuss measures for moving the peace process forward in light of the continuing impasse in the talks.

Support to local peace initiatives in areas affected by the insurgency, including conduct of local peace dialogues;

Intensified support to GRP's efforts to sustain ascendancy on human rights was undertaken through the following activities:

- Conducted advocacy work on respect for human rights as well as monitoring and addressing, through quick response, grave human rights and IHL violations, including: unexplained killings and disappearances of suspected communists, recruitment of children in armed conflict (or Children Involved in Armed Conflict [CIAC], also known as "child soldiers", and use of landmines, among others.

- In compliance with the President's directive to undertake quick response on cases of extrajudicial killings (EJKs), the OPAPP initiated the formation of a human rights quick response mechanism called Task Force Kasangga.

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The Government is also pursuing the implementation of the Kalayaan Barangay Program that initially targets 600 barangays affected by the communist insurgency. It involves the provision of basic socio-economic services, suitable medical facilities, and livelihood, among others. This effort is being expanded through the implementation of the Social Integration Program.

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On September 4, 2007, President Arroyo signed Proclamation No. 1377, granting amnesty to members of the CPP-NPA-NDF and of other communist rebel groups. Some of the salient points include:

The Amnesty Proclamation covers the crime of rebellion and all other crimes included therein or incident thereto in pursuit of political beliefs, but does not include the following, even if alleged to have been committed in pursuit of political beliefs: crimes against chastity, rape, torture, kidnapping for ransom, use and trafficking of illegal drugs, other crimes for personal ends, and violations of international law or convention and protocols.

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Among the other salient features of the Amnesty Proclamation include: filing of application for amnesty by any member of the CPP-NPA-NDF and other communist rebel groups who has committed any act or omission; extinction of criminal liability and restoration of civil and political rights to any amnesty grantee; issuance of safe conduct passes by the Peace and Order Councils; turn-over of firearms within thirty (30) days; and, filing of application for amnesty within six (6) months from its effectivity.

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The National Committee on Social Integration shall coordinate and monitor the implementation of the Amnesty Proclamation under the Social Integration Program (SIP).

On the other hand, Local Amnesty Centers under the Peace and Order Councils of provinces and cities, shall be established which shall be composed of the following:

- Provincial/City Prosecutor Office – as Chair
- Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP)
- DILG – shall receive the amnesty applications for processing by the P/CPOC
- Philippine National Police (PNP)
- Brigade/Batallion level of the AFP in the area
- OPAPP

Proclamation No. 1377 shall take effect upon concurrence by majority of both chambers of Congress, voting separately. To date, it is still pending in the Philippine Senate.

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Currently, the Philippine Government is also working to fast-track the peace efforts with Local Communist Breakaway Groups such as the Rebolusyonaryong Partidong Manggagawa ng Pilipinas-Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPMP-RPA-ABB) through development, reintegration, civil and political rights and cessation of hostilities;

Working on the completion of peace negotiations with Rebolusyonaryong Manggagawa ng Mindanao (RPMM) as we all the full implementation of the peace accord with the Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army (CPLA).

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The problem in the South

In order to better appreciate the perspective through which we view the peace talks with the MILF, let me begin with a brief history on the Bangsamoro problem, starting from the early sentiments of the Moros on the Philippine central government.

This will be followed by the evolution of the problem into the armed conflict that has been hounding the government for the past three decades and how much the country has already suffered in terms of security and development.

Lastly, I will present a short review of the GRP-MILF peace process, what we have already done, how far the government and the MILF have gone so far and what

more should be done to ensure the achievement of peace in the Land of the Promise.

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Retracing History: the Moro Problem

It is common knowledge that even before the colonizers set foot on the Philippine islands, the Moros already had established their own system of governance, the sultanate. However, the power of Moro political institutions had ultimately waned under three centuries of Spanish control .

Moreover, strategies of cooptation and deception of the Spaniards had pitted Filipinos against Moros in the Spanish-Moro wars which increased the apprehensions of the Moro leaders under a Filipino leadership. This was evident when Muslim leaders petitioned the United States government to remain under the American flag in 1924 and in 1935.

President Manuel Quezon, totally eradicated the sultanate and implemented policies that led to the deployment of hundreds of thousands Christian settlers from Luzon and Visayas to identified homesteads Mindanao that further sowed the great divide of the Christians and the Moros. The contradiction was most manifest in Sulu, the most advanced sultanate during the pre-Spanish period, that in 1961 it wanted to secede from the Philippines.

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The central government's neglect of Mindanao, coupled by the rising expectations borne out of modernization led to a variety of subsequent calls for autonomy, secessionism or federalism. In 1959, the Muslim Association of the Philippines expressed a desire to establish a separate government with Pakistan as a model. At that time, the quest for Bangsamoro independence followed a peaceful path, led by the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM).

From 1968-1969, at the height of the Philippine-Malaysian dispute over Sabah and of the "Jabidah incident," some members of the MIM underwent guerrilla training. From that time until the imposition of the Martial Law, a series of violent conflicts erupted between Moros and Christians. With President Marcos' proclamation of PD 1081, the Moro movement took an armed revolutionary approach.

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What are their reasons for asking independence from the Philippine territory?

Firstly, they are Moslems -- unlike the majority of Filipinos -- and Islam is not just a religion. It is a way of life. It is a code that is supposed to guide both the private and public lives of the Moslems.

Secondly, as I have already mentioned earlier, long before the Filipinos had established their system of governance, they already had the independent and self-sufficient sultanates, centuries before the colonizers came.

Thirdly, they claim that they were never colonized by the Spaniards. As such, they should not be included in the Philippine territory that was ceded to the Americans in 1898.

And fourthly, a distinct and united “Bangsamoro” identity has emerged, that has become a rallying symbol for all the 13 ethno-linguistic groups in Moslem Mindanao.

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The above sentiments, heightened by the discrimination and displacement that the Moros suffered from the policies of internal migration of succeeding administrations after President Quezon's, had eventually grown into a revolutionary fervor that was catalyzed by the Jabidah Massacre.

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The unfortunate event in 1968, that we know now as the “Jabidah Massacre”, led to the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). When President Marcos declared the Martial Law in 1972, the MNLF took up arms against the government. Because they were able to unify the Moros against its cause, the MNLF was able to wage a war against the Philippine government which lasted for two decades and a half.

However, the war that had then characterized Mindanao, had dealt huge costs on the government and its people. In terms of body counts, from 1970 to 1996, hundreds of thousands died from the government side, as well as from the MNLF and innocent civilians. At that time, the government also poured seventy-three billion pesos to the war machinery to decimate the MNLF.

In 2000, when President Estrada launched the “All-Out War” against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front -- the faction which broke away from mainstream MNLF

beginning 1977 -- an average of ten to twenty million pesos a day were eaten up by the war for a period of three months.

In 2003, just about the time that economic development efforts were underway in Central Mindanao, the military overran the Buliok Complex -- then the center of MILF activities after Camp Abubakar fell in 2000 -- as they were running after kidnap-for-ransom groups. The "Buliok Offensives" wasted forty-seven million worth of agriculture produce and ravaged one hundred thirty million worth of infrastructure, among others.

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The social costs of the Mindanao conflict are more glaring.

Stuck in-between the warring government forces and the MILF were innocent civilians who would always have to leave their homes every time an armed confrontation erupts.

In 2000, almost a million persons were displaced by the "All-Out War". Due to the crackdown on the Abu Sayyaf on the following year, some two hundred thousand persons were displaced, mainly in Southern Mindanao. The figure shot up again in 2003, as a consequence of the Buliok incident.

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In terms of foregone investments, please note that during major military operations following the "All-Out War" and the subsequent Abu Sayyaf atrocities, the investment growth rate plunged deeply from positive seventeen percent to negative five percent from 2000 to 2001.

Investments still shied away from the region as the rate did not recover from the deficit as of 2002; worse, it slid again in 2003, when the Buliok Offensives occurred.

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Meanwhile, despite all the military offensives launched since the MILF was acknowledged as a major internal security threat, the Front still remains a huge military challenge for the government at the present. Its forces are still scattered all over central and southern Mindanao with the main commands located in Lanao and Sulu islands.

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In fact, even if the number of affected barangays has remained steady and the number of firearms declined, the MILF strength even increased from the 2006 figure.

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The damages and sufferings that we endured because of the Moro insurgency has left the government no other feasible option but to fulfill its commitment to uphold peace.

After years of painstaking negotiations since the 70s, the Government, under President Ramos, succeeded in concluding the GRP-MNLF peace talks through the Final Peace Agreement. As a result, there was a major de-escalation of the armed conflict, that even other armed groups, for a time, ceased to commit atrocities in deference to the Peace Pact. Alongside the improved security situation, the ARMM, was given more importance and substance as a tool of governance in Muslim Mindanao.

Shortly after the signing of the GRP-MNLF Pact, the Government opened talks with the MILF and both parties agreed on a cessation of hostilities. This again resulted in a relatively peaceful situation in Mindanao, and in the entire country as well.

In 2001, learning from the lessons of the “All-Out War”, the parties went back to the negotiating table. This time, with the aim of moving the peace process forward, the negotiations were broken down into three major aspects.

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These three aspects are:

- 1.The Security Aspect – constituting our agreements on the cessation of hostilities, and the different ceasefire mechanisms we have put in place;
- 2.The Humanitarian, Rehabilitation and Development Aspects – which embodies the commitment of both sides to respect human rights, and provide assistance, rehabilitation and development to conflict-affected communities; and
- 3.The Ancestral Domain Aspect – which is the focus of our present negotiations, and discusses Bangsamoro critical issues relating to Bangsamoro identity, rights, culture, resources, traditional lands, etc.

It is hoped that the discussion on the 3 aspects of the talks, including the process of the negotiations, will lead us to answer the single talking point raised by the

MILF in 1997 at the start of the peace negotiations, that was “How to solve the Bangsamoro problem”.

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On the aspect of Security, I wish to show you a schematic diagram of our existing ceasefire-related mechanisms, and the dynamic relationships of established systems on the ground covering the GRP-MILF peace process. Our ceasefire stands firmly on 3 legs:

The most vital component of this is the Joint Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH), which ensures the successful day-to-day implementation of our ceasefire agreements. It is ably assisted by the Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs) that act as its operating arm in 13 provinces of Mindanao. The LMTs are crucial in providing support to the CCCH in the conduct of fact-finding missions and in monitoring the daily status of the ceasefire at the community level.

The second mechanism is the International Monitoring Team (IMT) that acts as observer in the implementation of the ceasefire agreements. It is presently manned by a composite group of representatives from Malaysia, Brunei, Libya and Japan. I am glad to note that Brunei, Libya and Japan have expressed full support for the peace process by way of their willingness to increase the number of their IMT contingent. We are also elated that other countries like Singapore, Indonesia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Australia and EU have expressed their openness to join the IMT.

A unique feature of the GRP-MILF peace process is our third mechanism called the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) which serves to coordinate the interdiction and isolation of criminal and lawless elements situated within or near MILF communities. Since its formation in January 2005, and subsequent renewal of its guidelines last year, the AHJAG has been instrumental in the arrests of criminal elements and in the resolution of high profile cases involving kidnapping, robbery-holdup, and other related criminal incidents.

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Since the above mechanisms were established, armed skirmishes were reduced to negligible levels from 2004 to 2008.

The generally peaceful climate encouraged more economic activities in the previously conflict-affected areas, particularly in Regions Ten, Eleven, Twelve and the ARMM, all of which exhibited increasing positive GDP growth rates from 2002 up to 2005, as shown.

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The second agenda item of the GRP-MILF peace process concerns the Humanitarian, Rehabilitation and Development Aspects. Under this component, we have signed a set of Implementing Guidelines as far back as 07 May 2002 which, among others, was responsible for the establishment of the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) – the development implementing arm of the MILF.

We are currently following three strategic thrusts on Rehabilitation and Development, mainly:

1.The Mindanao Trust Fund-Reconstruction and Development Program (MTF-RDP) which is presently under Phase 1 of its implementation. The MTF-RDP aims to support post-conflict reconstruction and development in the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao once final comprehensive settlement with the MILF is achieved. We acknowledge the strong level of support provided by the World Bank, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, the European Union and the U.S. On this endeavor;

2.Ongoing capacity-building programs for the personnel of the BDA to strengthen its institutional capability to plan and manage sustainable development projects for Bangsamoro communities;

3.The formulation of a long-term socio-economic development template for conflict-affected communities through the conduct of a 2-year study with the assistance of JICA. In parallel efforts, the Japanese Government, through its embassy, established the Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD) as an avenue to highlight its determination to work hand in hand with the Philippines and contribute to the Mindanao peace process through new initiatives and project proposals that will assist conflict-affected communities.

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The third substantive aspect on the negotiating table is Ancestral Domain. This has been the subject of intense discussions running four years now at the negotiating table. Indeed, it is a daunting task to search for a durable and lasting solution to the Mindanao problem.

In discussing Ancestral Domain, the GRP and MILF have earlier agreed to segment the issue according to four sub-topics (or stands), namely: Concept, Territory, Resources and Governance. Through these strands, both sides have gone beyond treating the issue of Ancestral Domain as a question of mere land ownership. Rather, we have forged a common objective of addressing the subject in terms of acknowledging the identity of the Bangsamoro people, affirming their rights over a homeland and its resources, and providing them the opportunity to

establish a system of governance suitable and acceptable to them as a people possessing a unique history and culture.

The Arroyo administration has been engaged in peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) since 2001, under a peace policy that is primarily aimed towards the attainment of a just, comprehensive and enduring peace under the rule of law and in accordance with constitutional processes. In particular, it shall seek to prevent and resolve internal armed conflicts and social unrests as well as their root causes through the pursuit of a comprehensive peace process.

The Ancestral Domain (AD) aspect of the 2001 GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace constitutes the main substantive agenda item of the peace talks with the MILF. After intensive negotiations spanning four (4) years, a proposed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) covering several consensus points along the discussion strands on concept, territory, resources and governance had emerged and was to be signed here on August 5, 2008, but was cancelled when a Temporary Restraining Order was issued by the Supreme Court, which later ruled on October 14, 2008 that the MOA was unconstitutional.

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Policy shift and cancellation of MOA

With the cancellation of the MOA, the peace process in Mindanao was dealt a deep setback, but the Philippine Government remains fully committed to working to reach as much progress as possible within the parameters set out by the Constitution and by the Muslim and Christian communities who are directly impacted by this process.

Panel reconstituted

The newly-reconstituted GRP Peace Panel has already been directed to touch base with our facilitators and their counterparts in the MILF for the scheduling of the resumption of talks. With our new paradigm on our peace efforts already in place, the Panel is poised and ready to embark on substantive discussions concerning the peace process at the negotiating table, including ceasefire-related issues, the International Monitoring Team (IMT), and accelerated development efforts for Mindanao.

The government wants peace and the only way to achieve it is across the negotiating table, not at the end of a gun. It also hopes that all parties are as committed as the government to restarting the peace process and resume negotiations as soon as possible.

Under a new peace paradigm

The new policy on the peace process focuses on authentic dialogues with communities and stakeholders who will formulate and determine, together with Government, the enhanced road map for the peace process. Authentic dialogues are discussions with local communities and stakeholders which may include consultations facilitated by credible third-party institutions such as civil society organizations (CSOs), religious and church groups to:

- create ownership of the peace process on the ground;
- provide input into the building of an enhanced roadmap for the peace process;
- generate inputs on the substantive agenda of the peace negotiations including how disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) may be carried out.

Consultation Inputs

The results of the wide-ranging dialogues being initiated so far by the Bishop Ulama Conference affirm the government's basic premises in the peace process, namely, that the peace settlement with the rebel groups should indeed seek a balance between Constitutionality and public sentiment. Public support is necessary for any peace effort to succeed. Through such dialogues, we are able to determine the way forward in the GRP-MILF peace process that would be reflective of the aspirations of ALL stakeholders in Mindanao.

Continuing rehabilitation efforts

The National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), in collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and several donor organizations, has poured in humanitarian and relief assistance to meet urgent needs in areas of Mindanao that are suffering from the unprovoked and unjustifiable armed violence by lawless members in the MILF.

Based on NDCC report, over 100,000 families have been affected and displaced by last year's armed hostilities in the provinces of Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Sarangani and Maguindanao. A convergence of support from several donor agencies is also being facilitated to effect delivery of immediate assistance and implementation of rehabilitation programs in the affected communities in Mindanao.

Opportunities to pursue common ground

The promotion of inter-religious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation has become a cornerstone of Philippine policy for peace and development. The concept of interreligious and intercultural dialogue is borne out of our history, largely shaped by our cultural and religious diversity.

Our very own Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), which is recognized to be the very first kind in the world, continues to be a partner of the government in pursuing the national peace agenda of the present administration. This organization and many other interfaith groups that have sprung up in recent years, form part of the civil society network, whose strength and support significantly define the outcome of the peace process.

Being an essential component of a comprehensive peace agenda, the interfaith dialogue and cooperation has effectively laid forward a common bind to unceasingly build consensus and establish ownership of the peace process among our people.

Strengthening the peace constituency

In spite of the many hurdles besetting the path to peace, the Philippine government is firmly committed to uphold the primacy of the peace process particularly in Mindanao, and to pursue a paradigm for peace, where a broad-based coalition of nations are working hand-in-hand with in confidence- building measures anchored on strong interfaith dialogue, cultural awareness, and investments in human development.

As a long-term strategy to sustain the gains of the peace process, our government has embarked on various programs and initiatives involving the active participation of civil society groups, including the schools and media.

These include peace education and advocacy, promotion of interfaith and interreligious dialogues at various levels—community, national and global, continuing linkage and coordination with partner organizations through conferences and seminars, and continuing information dissemination initiatives.

Philippine Interfaith Initiatives

Interfaith initiatives in the Philippines afford the best opportunity to serve as a catalyst of positive reforms. The 2004-2010 Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan, a framework for governance of the present administration, values interfaith dialogue, education and advocacy, as effective tools for healing and reconciliation in conflict-affected communities of the country.

Today, we nurture interfaith initiatives especially those at the grassroots level by providing them with democratic space and by ensuring equal opportunity for all those involved.

The 2006-2010 Philippine Plan of Action on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation continues to strengthen government and civil society partnership and capacities in

promoting interfaith dialogue and solidarity particularly in the area of education and training, media advocacy, peace process, poverty reduction, human rights promotion, environmental protection, women empowerment and anti-corruption.

Sustaining the momentum

As we continue to face and confront every single challenge arising from our daunting work for peace and development, we must remain grounded with our goals and stay on course with our efforts to secure peace not merely as a temporary option, but as a permanent achievement and an enduring foundation.

May this year's Roundtable, therefore, provide the platform for staging greater collaboration, stronger partnership, and clearer focus on the steps that we all should take towards engendering a culture of peace that will lead to a stronger region for our present and future generations.

Thank you and Mabuhay!