

Bangsamoro govt to be inclusive

By Santha Oorjitham

WILL PEACE HOLD IN MINDANAO? That's a question which will be addressed at the 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable next week. Three of the speakers provide Santha Oorjitham a preview via email



Peace negotiators exchanging signed copies of the Framework Agreement in Manila in October last year. Looking on are Tengku Datuk Abdul Ghafar Tengku Mohamed (centre front), MILF chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim (back left), Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Philippine President Benigno Aquino (second right) and presidential adviser Teresita Deles. AFP pic

Question: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has the support of the majority of the Moro population. But without including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and other groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) in the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), how can the success of the new Bangsamoro regional government be ensured?

Secretary Teresita Deles is presidential adviser on the peace process in the Philippines: The FAB serves as a political settlement for the Bangsamoro's aspiration for self-governance through genuine autonomy. It is not only for the MILF. The peace process has always abided by the principle of inclusivity and participation of various stakeholders because the success of a political settlement equally rests on political acceptability -- the support and consensus of stakeholders -- and political will of President Benigno Aquino in the vision for achieving just and lasting peace.

The MNLF is supportive of the FAB; their leadership has expressed support to this agreement. Meanwhile, the ASG and BIFM are lawless elements that are being dealt with by our security sector.

Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim is MILF chairman: The FAB is very inclusive. The MILF is up to the Transition period only. Any group including the MNLF, Abu Sayyaf and BIFM can participate in the

regular Bangsamoro political entity starting 2016. Therefore it is just a matter of convincing them that the new political entity is in fact not for the MILF alone but for everybody.

Tengku Datuk Abdul Ghafar Tengku Mohamed is the Malaysian facilitator on the FAB: It is MILF's turn to negotiate. MNLF had its chance. They already signed the Tripartite Agreement and the Jakarta Accord in 1976 and 1986 respectively. MILF claimed that the agreements failed to reflect the genuine aspiration of the Mindanao Muslims. In fact, MNLF was given the chance to govern: two of its top leadership were elected as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), others were appointed in various government agencies and some elected as mayors.

The MILF moved the negotiation to a different level. MILF claimed inclusivity and not ownership of the process and the agreements and is seeking for a real peace through a political solution to the Muslim question. It involves real autonomy, both political and financial autonomy, and the issue of ancestral domain.

The process is inclusive. Muslims and others in the area are the stakeholders who will decide the success of creating the new political entity. MILF's role is to lead the negotiations and secure the Comprehensive Compact Agreement, lead the transitional commission and transitional authority and hand over the Bangsamoro to a duly elected Bangsamoro government in May 2016.

Question: If Malaysia as the facilitator didn't include all the parties, won't it be accused of bias?

Deles: Malaysia serves as a third-party facilitator to the peace negotiations with the MILF. The parties and not the facilitator negotiate on the agenda, parameters and approach of the negotiations. There is a separate review table with the MNLF that is facilitated by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Peace Committee for Southern Philippines, led by Indonesia.

Al-Haj Murad: Malaysia served as facilitator since 2001 after the Philippine government under president Gloria Arroyo requested Malaysia to convince the MILF to return to the negotiating table after the all-out war launched by President Joseph Estrada, in the midst of the negotiation in 2000, against the MILF and the Bangsamoro people. The MILF acceded to the request of the Philippine government on condition that Malaysia served as third-party facilitator. Other groups were not included because the request of the Philippine government is specific on the resumption of the talks with the MILF.

Abdul Ghafar: Malaysia was invited by both the Philippines and the MILF to facilitate the peace talks between the government and MILF in 2000. That was the term of reference. So there is no question of bias.

Question: MILF has criticised the pace of on-going negotiations, especially with relation to the Annexes and Comprehensive Compact Agreement, which have not been finalised. Please comment.

Deles: Both parties are decisively pursuing the completion of the three remaining annexes so as to reach a comprehensive agreement as soon as possible. The perceived delay is due to the government undertaking due diligence on the different issues, their implications, and the political and legal aspects of matters like taxation, budgetary appropriation and revenues on natural resources. These we are looking for creative solutions to achieve political and fiscal autonomy and the sustainability of the future Bangsamoro government.

Murad: The MILF is very concerned that any delay in the signing of the annexes and eventually the Comprehensive Compact Agreement will affect the transition mechanism and timeframe set for the drafting of the Basic Law, which will pave the way for the establishment of the MILF-led Transition Authority at least one year before May 2016 and finally that of the regular Bangsamoro government in 2016. The annexes shall serve as the main basis for the drafting of the Basic Law and the Comprehensive Compact Agreement.

Abdul Ghafar: The government is taking extra time and being careful. Once finalised, they will be followed by signing of the Comprehensive Compact Agreement.

Question: To what extent was dissatisfaction with the FAB linked to the incursion into Sabah? There are reports that Sabahans of Moro descent supported the incursion.

Deles: The Sabah standoff, or the proprietary claim of the sultanate of Sulu, is a diplomatic matter. The government is addressing it in a separate platform within the purview of the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs.

Murad: The incursion into Sabah has nothing to do with the peace process. It is a separate issue between the Philippine government and the heirs of the sultanate of Sulu and the Malaysian government. All past agreements between the Philippine government and the Bangsamoro, including that of the MNLF, never mentioned Sabah. However, some vested interest group dissatisfied with the FAB capitalised on the Sabah incursion to make obvious their dissatisfaction. Sabahans who supported the incursion are mainly those related to the heirs of the Sulu Sultanate.

Abdul Ghafar: Sabah and peace talks between the government of the Philippines and MILF are two different things. Only certain groups of people try to link the two.

Question: How have the other ethno-linguistic groups responded to the Bangsamoro political entity and what are their expectations?

Deles: The FAB received overwhelming support from various cultural, religious and sectoral groups in the country, both at the local and national levels, as well as from the international community. Inclusivity has always been part of the whole peace process and the agreement respects and recognises the diversity of people in the proposed Bangsamoro region. The FAB provides that the Bangsamoro Basic Law will undergo a plebiscite in the envisioned territory and it culminates in the first election for the Bangsamoro government by 2016.

Murad: There was a mixed reaction among the other ethno-linguistic groups, but the majority of them welcome the FAB and their inclusion in the new Bangsamoro political entity. Those who are not keen to join are given the freedom choice in the FAB.

Abdul Ghafar: More than 60 per cent support the process and the FAB. The government has recognised the grievances of the people in the area. Above all, the FAB recognises the identity of Muslims and others in the area and promises full autonomy.

Question: What will be the role of the local clan and political leaders with private armies, who have been a stumbling block in the past?

Deles: Particularly, all five provincial governors of the ARMM had observed the peace negotiations and expressed support to the FAB. One of the constructive roles they can play in the peace process is the proper information of their constituents about the FAB and the proposed Bangsamoro and also the upkeep of peace and order in their areas. Their cooperation is needed for the conduct of plebiscite for the Basic Law, which once ratified, will make the ARMM deemed abolished, and hence will pave the way for the first election for the Bangsamoro government.

While there are individuals or political leaders deemed as "spoilers", the government of the Philippines peace panel has reached out to them in dialogue and we can say that another indicator of success of the peace process is that they are supportive of the FAB. After the recent 2013 mid-term elections, many leaders or candidates expressed support and inclusion in their platform of the FAB.

Al-Haj Murad: Most of the local clans and political leaders are either identified with the Philippine government or the rebel groups. They will be subjected to the normalisation process, which is still under negotiation in one of the annexes to the FAB.

Abdul Ghafar: One of the major challenges to the peace agreement is how to deal with the issues of firearm proliferation and the private armies of the rich clan leaders. Firearm proliferation will be dealt with in the normalisation annex.

On the issue of clans, traditional leaders and mainstream politicians, this is where MILF should be inclusive, magnanimous and statesmanlike so as to be able to prevent these groups from becoming spoilers to the peace process. Once the Bangsamoro is entrenched in the area the local clans, leaders or politicians have the right to opportunities in the Bangsamoro. No one can stop them exercising their political franchise and participating in the democratic process in the area.

Question: A recent report by Standard Chartered notes that the economy of the ARMM had been less than 1 per cent of the Philippines' total GDP and its gross domestic product per capita was about a quarter of the Philippines' average. Mindanao has been allocated 26.1 per cent of the national infrastructure budget for this year. How will the FAB help in alleviating poverty and reducing the gaps between the haves and have-nots?

Deles: The cycle of poverty, conflict, and poor economic performance in ARMM, coupled with poor governance over the years in the region, underscores the need for a thorough revamp of the governance structure in the ARMM towards the achievement of genuine autonomy, as envisioned in the FAB.

Under the Aquino administration, aside from the goal of ending the internal armed conflict, the national government has embarked on a reform agenda for ARMM under Republic Act 10153 synchronising the ARMM elections to the national polls in May 2013 which authorised the president to appoint officers-in-charge in the region. As part of this reform agenda, the national government supported a catch-up plan for its socio-economic development through stimulus funds including the improvement of the region's infrastructure.

The study conducted by Standard Chartered, actually shows that in achieving a peace agreement, the ARMM will experience economic growth, because it has a huge economic potential which has unfortunately been stunted because of the conflict. The cessation of armed hostilities will allow development programmes and services to reach communities previously made inaccessible by armed conflict and allow the uninterrupted build-up of human resources and livelihood in areas where they are most needed.

Murad: Poverty in the Bangsamoro homeland is mainly due to the continuing war situation in the area for decades. Once a political solution to the Bangsamoro question is in place and genuine and lasting peace will reign, people can concentrate more on improving their social and economic lives. Bangsamoro homeland is very rich in natural resources, which, when harnessed for the benefit of the Bangsamoro people, will highly contribute to the enhancement of their economic status.

Abdul Ghafar: The ARMM is the poorest region in the Philippines. The area suffered decades-old conflict, social injustice and social ills. Developing the area needs political and social stability. Once there is peace, it will jump start development and open economic opportunities in the area.

PM: Inclusive growth vital

THREE CHALLENGES: Asian nations must resolve development, sustainability, security issues

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ASIAN nations must deepen their commitment to cooperate on climate change, regional security and development, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

He said the three primary challenges of development, sustainability and conflict were closely connected and must be met if Asia were to fulfil "the promise of a century".

"Asian development must be inclusive, checking rising inequality and division. It must be sustainable, for the new economic powers cannot repeat the mistakes of the old."

"And, the fracture at the heart of Asia's internal politics must be healed, lest they splinter under the weight of the world's attention," he said in delivering the keynote address at the 27th Asia Pacific Roundtable last night.

The prime minister said the United Nations remained the best hope for securing a global settlement and commitment to binding carbon cuts.

"All countries should stand in favour of emissions reductions, and unite behind the promise of a global low-carbon economy."

Najib also warned of the dangers of unchecked defence spending against a backdrop of underlying currents of nationalism, aggression and discord.

With Asia's defence spending rising by nearly five per cent last year, he said, the region could be sucked into an arms race, bringing a higher risk of conflict and disruption to trade.

"From longstanding tensions on the Korean peninsula to border disputes in Kashmir and the insurgency in the south of Thailand, conflict threatens to disrupt Asia's development."

"I believe the answer lies in greater cooperation. Confronted with complex disagreements between states, Asia must place its trust in diplomatic solutions."

Turning his attention to the South China Sea, Najib said a Code of Conduct should be passed in order to ensure claimants did not



Regent of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (left) arriving for the 27th Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur last night. Pic by Syarafiq Abd Samad

act unilaterally.

"For Asian nations, the problem is ours to solve."

"Should we stray from the path of dialogue and cooperation, we may pave the way for other parties to take remedial action to protect the freedom of navigation and safe passage."

Najib also highlighted the need to ensure Asia's development brought economic prosperity to all and not just riches for a few.

He called for the formation of a single Southeast Asian market, in the hope of binding the regional economic community in the service of common goals.

"A thriving single market will support jobs, growth and increase the standard of living of more than half a billion people."

"It will also ensure that Asia's remarkable growth story spills across into all member states."

Organised by the Institute of

Strategic and International Studies, the opening of the roundtable was also attended by the Regent of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, China's Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Fu Ying, Brunei's Second Foreign Affairs Minister Pehin Seri Lim Jock Seng, Asean-Isis chairman Prince Norodom Sirivudh, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed and Isis Malaysia chairman Tan Sri Jawhar Hassan.

Najib calls for greater cooperation among Asian nations

BY CINDI LOO

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KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak yesterday said greater cooperation among nations in Asia will be the solution to rising tensions caused by nationalism, aggression and discord.

"Whether bilaterally, multilaterally, or regionally, countries should abandon posturing which can ratchet up tension," he said.

"Instead, we should heed the fundamental principles of good diplomacy: sovereign equality, respect for territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes and mutual benefit in relations," he said in a keynote address at the opening of the 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable here last night.

Using the South China Sea as an example where it has been a source of contention and occasional violence among many countries, Najib proposed for a code of conduct to be implemented to ensure disagreements do not escalate.

"We should seek the common ground needed for an amicable understanding among the claimants. Without meaningful

progress on the passage of this code, claimants will explore other means to entrench their positions," he said.

Apart from conflict resolution, Najib also pointed out that climate change and sustainable development will be challenges the Asian region will be facing as it attracts more investment and global attention.

On climate change, Najib said Asia must commit to binding carbon cuts, as more than 40% of the world's greenhouse gases will come from this region in the next decade.

"All this augurs well for a comprehensive agreement that will protect the development rights of less-developed countries, unlock huge growth in green technologies, and ease some tension over natural resource," he said.

He added that Asia's development should bring economic opportunity to all and not just riches for a few.

"Malaysia supports the push to create a single market here in Southeast Asia. It is my hope that the Asean economic community will bind us together in the service of common goals, providing greater depth of opportunity for citizens across Southeast Asia," he said.



Najib and the Regent of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah, arriving at the Hilton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday evening for the 27th Asia Pacific Roundtable.

PRIME NEWS

China's regional push

JOURNEY OF TRUST: Parties should honour commitments to South China Sea code

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CHINA will continue to push for "cooperative security" in the region which includes maintaining peace in the disputed areas in the South China Sea.

Former vice-foreign minister of China Fu Ying said Chinese and Asean leaders had embarked on a trust-building journey for more than a decade which brought about the Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea.

Last week, diplomats discussed a Code of Conduct under the declaration which had been a cornerstone for maintaining tranquillity in the area.

"For China, we prefer that the parties to the DOC honour their commitments and that the code be worked out on the basis of confi-



dence in each other's behaviour.

"China would react to steps going beyond the DOC."

Fu, who is the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the National People's Congress of China, said the purpose was to bring the issue back on the right track.

"A programme of projects is being formulated with the support of the China-Asean maritime cooperation fund worth three billion yuan (RM1.5 billion).

"Hopefully, this will add to the positive effort towards joint development," she said at the 27th Asia Pacific Roundtable here.

On the Chinese Dream propounded by President Xi Jinping at the

12th National People's Congress, she described the concept as timely because a rapidly growing China was beset with challenges which ranged from jobs and basic needs to the environment.

The general direction of the country was moving towards industrialisation, urbanisation and agricultural modernisation.

Fu said the Chinese dream related to not only its people but also represented the dreams of many in the developing world which now had the opportunity to grow their economy.

According to its latest five-year plan, China would import a total of US\$10 trillion (RM3.1 trillion) worth of goods and its overseas investment would have reached US\$500 billion.

"So, achieving the Chinese dream will bring more opportunities for Asia and, therefore, help the real-

isation of the dreams or visions of other countries in the region."

On whether there had been a shift in the centre of world power, Fu said the shift involved dissemination to a wider sphere, brought about by industrialisation which was going on in countries like China and India.

On the region, China wanted to further promote regional economic integration and this included the China-Asean free trade agreement.

The three-day event ends today.

US, China regional roles discussed

The two economic superpowers loom large in 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable

By FINTAN NG

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KUALA LUMPUR: China and the United States loomed large in discussions of several plenary sessions of the 27th Asia Pacific Roundtable whose theme of *Strategising Change in Asia* focuses on understanding the dynamics of the changes the region is undergoing and their impact.

A number of questions were fielded from the floor on both countries' role in Asia Pacific and Asean where in the past year territorial disputes have erupted between China and Japan as well as China and a number of Asean member countries.

On the part of the United States, President Barack Obama's speech to the Australian parliament in November 2011 on the country's pivot or rebalancing towards Asia Pacific has been understood by China as a policy to contain its influence in the region.

US ambassador Christopher Hill, who spoke on US foreign policy and engagement with Asia, said any country not engaged in this region (in which the World Bank predicts 7.8% economic growth this year) would be making a big mistake.

He pointed out that the United

States has an enduring interest in Asia-Pacific and that it was important that the country be seen as one of many players on the stage and that the engagement was not confrontational nor condescending.

"We're here to develop multilateral ties and it's not in the interest of anyone to ask to choose between the United States and China," Hill said, adding that the United States did not see countries in the region having closer ties with China as a threat to its influence.

He said as part of the engagement, President Barack Obama's administration has invested a lot in building up the multilateral infrastructure of the region.

Meanwhile, National People's Congress (NPC) of China's foreign affairs committee chairman Fu Ying, who spoke on the "Chinese Dream" and how this term related to Asia, said the dream cannot be realised without good relations with the country's neighbours.

"In return, the Chinese dream will add to peace and prosperity of the region and the world," she said.

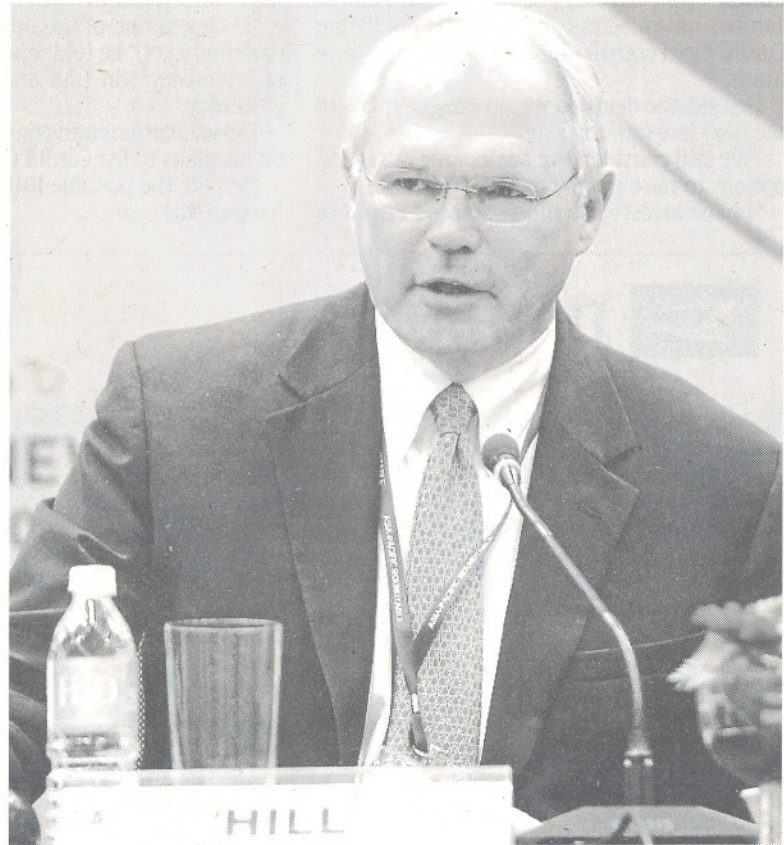
The term relates to a March speech by President Xi Jinping shortly after being elected by the NPC.

While the Chinese dream has been variously interpreted since the speech, Fu said it related to individuals having better lives and for the country to provide conditions for achieving it while the individual efforts would add to national prosperity.

She has advised her NPC colleagues who often asked why the "neighbourhood" has had so much disquiet and trouble, especially in recent years, to look at the region from a global and historical perspective.

The former vice foreign minister said China has benefitted from a peaceful and cooperative environment and the country's policy of peace, domestic stability and prosperity were important contributors to the region.

She said the trade and investment figures from last year showed how important the peace dividend has been for the region and the world: China contributed 58% to Asian development, trade with Asia amounted to US\$1.3 trillion, trade with the European Union and the United States amounted to US\$1 trillion while half of the country's US\$77bil overseas investments went to Asia.



Hill: 'We're here to develop multilateral ties and it's not in the interest of anyone to ask to choose between the United States and China.'

Call for Asia-Pacific treaty

KUALA LUMPUR: Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natalegawa reiterated his call for a new Asia-wide treaty to promote trust and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

At the 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Marty said an "Indo-Pacific treaty of friendship and cooperation" would address three challenges, namely the trust deficit between countries, territorial disputes and managing change.

First proposed at the Indonesia Conference in Washington last month, Marty said the new framework would allow Asean to play a

more active role in the Asia-Pacific by offering solutions based on its own experiences, as the region deals with the increasing role of world powers, such as the United States and China.

"This is our chance to extrapolate Asean's experience towards the wider world. It is no longer good enough for us to protect ourselves. We must take this chance to shape or mould our future.

"I think (Asean) has enough of a track record to offer an approach that can be win-win for all."

Marty said the new framework

would be built in the spirit of Asean's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

A common framework, he said, would also allow countries in the Asia-Pacific to deal with unexpected developments, citing the recent territorial dispute between Taiwan and the Philippines.

Marty also called for countries to abandon old world views, which treated any rising power as a potential threat.

On bilateral links between Malaysia and Indonesia, Marty said it was not only important to build



*Indonesian Foreign Minister **Dr Marty Natalegawa** says Asean can offer a win-win approach*

comprehensive ties, not only between governments, state actors and businesses, but also on a people-to-people level between the two countries.

MILF: Misuari will not be able to derail peace process

KUALA LUMPUR: The former chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Nur Misuari, will not succeed in his attempt to derail the southern Philippine peace process which Malaysia is facilitating.

Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Murad Ebrahim, whose group is in peace talks with the Philippine government, said the majority of the people in southern Philippines had expressed their support to the framework peace agreement that both parties signed last October.

"Nur Misuari is quite critical of the framework agreement, but the overwhelming support of the

Bangsamoro people and the international community to the framework agreement is a very strong signal that the majority of the people welcome this agreement," Murad said in response to a question during a plenary session titled "Will peace hold in Mindanao" at the 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable.

The three-day event that ended yesterday was jointly organised by the Asean Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis) and Isis Malaysia.

Misuari has condemned the framework agreement which he said had left the people of southern Philippines shortchanged and has

supported claims on Sabah by the self-styled Sulu sultanate whose followers mounted an armed incursion into the state in February.

Murad said the MNLF, which Misuari used to lead and which the MILF broke away from, was now split into four groups.

"The other three groups have already expressed their support for the framework agreement."

Murad noted that Misuari had also failed in his bid to be elected as governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao during the Philippine mid-term elections last month.

Philippine Presidential Adviser to

the peace process Secretary Teresita Quintos Deles, replying to a question on the issue of the Philippine claim on Sabah which resurfaced following the incursion into the state, said that the matter needed to be resolved separately.

"The peace process is one to help resolve an internal conflict, and there is no way that the peace process can resolve a conflict or a problem in which the area involved (Sabah) is currently under the political jurisdiction of another country (Malaysia)," she said.

Murad said that following the signing of the framework agreement, both the MILF and the

Philippine government were working to draw up the three annexes that would contain details about the autonomous Bangsamoro region which they hope to be in place by 2016.

"Work on the first two annexes on power-sharing and wealth-sharing are almost 95% complete, while the third which is on the normalisation process is 60% ready."

'Intrusion won't affect peace pact'

INTACT: Lahad Datu incident a separate issue, says Manila

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THE armed intrusion by Sulu gunmen in Lahad Datu, Sabah in February is unlikely to affect the ongoing peace process in Mindanao, the Philippine government said yesterday.

Presidential adviser on the peace process Secretary Teresita Quintos-Deles said the Sabah intrusion and the peace agreement signed by the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) last October were two separate issues that should not be linked.

"The armed intrusion was carried out by a group whose motivations have nothing to do with the peace agreement signed between the government and the MILF.



"The claims (by the Sulu sultanate) should instead be addressed through separate negotiations," she said during the 27th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

Quintos-Deles was joined by MILF chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim and the Malaysian facilitator to the peace process, Tengku Datuk Abdul Ghafar Tengku Mohamed, as part of the panel during the plenary session titled "Will peace hold in Mindanao?"

During the session, Quintos-Deles also addressed delays in implementing the annexes to the Framework Agreement on the

Bangsamoro (FAB), saying that the Philippine government wanted to avoid the mistakes of past administrations.

Murad urged for negotiations on the annexes to the FAB to be concluded as quickly as possible.

Tengku Ghafar remained optimistic that the final agreement between Manila and the MILF was "within sight" despite the region's long history of armed conflict.

Responding to a question from the audience, Tengku Ghafar said Malaysia would not be able to play a similar role in assisting in resolving the conflict involving the Muslim community in Myanmar, owing to the principle of non-interference.

He said Malaysia would still be able to assist through other means. "Malaysia was formally invited to assist in the negotiations process by the Philippines government."

PRIME NEWS

US will not take sides in claims

KUALA LUMPUR: The United States does not take sides in territorial issues in the South China Sea or anywhere else in the world as it expects them to be resolved without coercion.

US Pacific Command chief Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, however, acknowledged that the maritime domain in this region, which he described as an important access in terms of global trade, was also fraught with complexities.

"We have a complex scenario in South China Sea where there are overlapping claims," he said at a media briefing after his presentation at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable organised by ISIS.

The US, he added, could support the dialogue between regional institutions, such as Asean and China.

Locklear warned that miscalculations must be avoided as they would lead to harmful escalation in an area where nine of the 10 largest ports in the world were located.

The sea lanes are also the busiest with over half the world's cargo and 70 per cent of ship-borne energy supplies transiting this region daily.

"It is also the most militarised region in the world with seven of the 10 largest armies, the world's largest

navies, and five of the world's declared nuclear nations having a presence there."

On his first visit to Malaysia, Locklear said tension in the South China Sea has heightened because of friction arising from countries defining their "national interests".

"But I don't lay awake and worry for a significant event as all the countries involved understand what is at stake and that it could be a

long process with restraint and peace as the only way (to resolve the matter). The question is whether we are thinking enough to get beyond the incidents and stay forward in a peaceful manner as there is a lot at stake if we don't get it right."

By Rupa Damodaran



US Pacific Command chief Admiral Samuel J. Locklear says issues must be resolved without coercion