

Philippines, Muslim rebels reach breakthrough in peace talks

The Philippine government said Thursday stalled peace talks with the country's largest Muslim separatist rebel group were expected to resume soon after negotiators reached a breakthrough on a contentious issue.

Negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have been suspended since December 2007 due to disagreements over the ancestral domain issue, or the creation of a Muslim homeland in the southern region of Mindanao.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said the differences on the controversial issue 'have almost been removed' when negotiators met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Wednesday.

'Praise God,' Arroyo said in a Manila radio interview. 'Yes, we will soon resume formal peace talks.'

Presidential peace adviser Hermogenes Esperon said that during the Kuala Lumpur meeting, government and MILF negotiators agreed on several key points on the creation of the ancestral homeland, which expands an existing autonomous region in Mindanao.

He said the points included 'the jurisdiction and control of the natural resources' in areas to be considered ancestral domain of Muslims.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza said details of the deal will be relayed to the cabinet as soon as the government's chief negotiator, Rodolfo Garcia, returns from Malaysia.

'This will provide a big boost to our efforts to have a peaceful settlement,' he said. 'But there will still be other points for negotiations but this agreement (on ancestral domain) will already give a big push to the peace negotiations.'

The MILF has been fighting for an independent Islamic state in Mindanao since 1978.

The breakthrough in the negotiations was reached amid fears of escalating hostilities between the military and the MILF in Mindanao, where sporadic fighting has erupted between the two forces since last month despite a 2003 ceasefire.

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