

BY Sammy Santos

Echoing the statement of government peace negotiator Senen Bacani that the current contentious issues in the draft Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) are not irreconcilable, Senate President Frank Drilon urged the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) panels to come up with “acceptable” solutions to ensure swift passage of the proposed BBL by Congress.

“We are all Filipinos. We have to agree for the sake of everyone, of our future,” Drilon told Senate reporters in an “ambush” interview Wednesday after his comment was sought on the reported impasse now plaguing the Mindanao peace process.

In a peace forum at the Ateneo de Zamboanga earlier, Bacani said the government panel was optimistic that the outstanding differences in the draft BBL could be harmonized, citing the indomitable commitment of both parties to arrive at a mutually acceptable bill at the earliest possible time.

Bacani said a healthy communication line between the parties had helped them achieve consensus and breakthroughs despite the challenges relating to the draft BBL.

“Let me clarify, there’s no stalemate in the drafting of the BBL,” Bacani said, adding that both sides were intent on finding mutually acceptable formulations. “Once the president is comfortable with the draft bill, he will submit it to Congress,” Bacani said.

He noted some of the issues with the BBL that the panels were trying to solve involved finding the right legal language that would embody the principles of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) that was signed by both parties in Malacanang last March 27, 2014,

Drilon, a consistent Mindanao peace advocate even during past governments, said the Senate leadership would give the "highest priority" to the proposed law once its draft was submitted to Congress.

"Once we receive the draft for the BBL, it will be the highest priority. Whenever it is submitted, we will work hard so that we can meet the target ratification by second half of next year, so we can have the Bangsamoro regional government in place once this administration ends in June of 2016," Drilon said.

"We cannot afford to fail as far as the BBL is concerned. We must have something in place so that the Bangsamoro will provide stability and improvements in the economic life of Mindanao," he said.

Drilon pointed out that the Bangsamoro regional government that will replace the current Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao through Congressional fiat should be in place before President Aquino ends his term in 2016. "That's our timetable. We should have a new structure for the Bangsamoro at the end of President Noyonoy Aquino's term," Drilon said.

Government chief negotiator Miriam Coronel-Ferrer herself downplayed fears that the process of crafting a mutually acceptable draft BBL has reached a deadlock even as she confirmed that they were having significant difficulties.

Ferrer appealed to the Filipino people to give the peace panels a few more weeks to settle the remaining issues. "We have also sorted out a good number of items, so we're sort of down to the most difficult ones," she said.

"There are several considerations. One, of course, is this is a law that will be passed by Congress. We need to make sure there are no gaps or holes there that people who will scrutinize it on the bases of the Constitution will use to further derail the process," she explained.

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Congress resumes its session on Monday, July 28, with the opening of the 2nd Regular Session of the 16th Congress. On that day, senators and congressmen will again hold a joint session to listen to President Aquino's State of the Nation Address (SONA).

Given the challenges his administration is currently facing, President Noy Aquino is expected to call on the Filipino people to keep the faith as he outlines the final stages of his programs of government and the package of reforms he has sought to implement.

In his SONA, political pundits are speculating that the president will expound further on his defense of the controversial Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP) that was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court as well as on his take on the current problems facing his administration's efforts to forge peace with the MILF to bring an end to the decades-old secessionist war in Mindanao.

In the Senate, Drilon said the resumption of sessions would be an opportunity for legislators to buckle down to work and "endeavor to bring back the people's faith in the Senate as a bastion of our democracy."

"With the First Regular Session, the Senate has shown a strong resolve to fulfil its duty to the nation, with fervor and determination. Amid the issues that confront us, we have persevered and continued to discharge our duties to the Republic, with our commitments and vows to the people serving as the guiding light on the road to recovery and redemption," Drilon said.

Before it went on a month-long break in June, Senate approved more than 19 bills and 41 resolutions. The senators also concurred in the ratification of three international treaties and adopted 44 resolutions. The various Senate committees, subcommittees and joint congressional oversight committees conducted 352 public hearings on 806 bills.

Vowing to immediately tackle pending priority, Drilon said legislators "must not lose sight of our ultimate goal, which is to provide a better life for each Filipino; a life that is not wanting in

choices and opportunities.”

The Senate is expected to pass on third and final reading four bills on education that will make the Philippines globally competitive with other countries and a bill aimed at eradicating discrimination against Filipino women.

Among the bills in the chamber's immediate agenda are Senate Bill No. (SBN) 2274, which seeks to expand access to education through open learning and distance education in tertiary levels of education; SBN 2272, which aims to strengthen the ladderized interface between technical-vocational education and training and higher education; SBN 2212, which promotes entrepreneurship and financial education among the Filipino youth; and SBN 2275 or the *Iskolar ng Bayan Act*, which mandates all state colleges and universities to annually confer automatic admission and provide scholarship grants to the top 10 public high school students of their graduating class; and SBN 1647 or the *Crime of Premature Marriage*, which seeks to amend Article 351 of the Revised Penal Code. Under the law, women who marry before the 300th day of their husband's death or the 300th day of their legal separation, in cases of annulment are fined not exceeding P500. The same punishment is meted to women who marry before they give birth to their offspring in the event of a husband's death or separation.

The Senate will also prioritize bills for the proposed creation of a National Student Loan Program and on the Special Education Bill. Also on the list are fiscal and financial legislations such as the Anti-Trust Law, Mining Law, the Barangay Officials Welfare Act, and the extended Philhealth coverage for the nation's senior citizens.

The Senate is also set to approve Senate Joint Resolution 2 and SBN 480, which aim to increase the subsistence and quarterly allowances of military and police personnel.

“We will also work to increase the tax exemption ceiling of the 13th month pay for Christmas bonuses and other benefits for public workers from P30,000 to P75,000 so our workers can go home during the holidays without having to worry about decreases in their bonuses,” Drilon said.

In line with the reform-driven agenda of the 16th Congress, Drilon said, pending bills on the amendments to the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act and the Probation Law would likewise

be given priority.

As agreed upon with the leadership of the House of Representatives, Drilon said they would soon discuss the possibility of amending certain economic provisions to the 1987 Constitution to improve the country's ability to invite direct foreign investments.

"The Senate remains confident and committed to the cause of serving our people, no matter the challenges that this institution will face. We will continue to enact measures that are of paramount interest and importance to our people, especially in terms of improving the quality of Filipino life, and reforming public service," the Senate president further said.