

Not one from among the dozens of journalists who covered Tuesday's homecoming to North Cotabato of 2014 Binibining Pilipinas Mary Jean "MJ" Lastimosa had ever thought that she, too, supports the Mindanao peace process.

Lastimosa even favors the conduct of a plebiscite as a democratic means of determining the acceptability of the proposed Bangsamoro entity among residents of areas that are to be included in the Bangsamoro core territory.

"It is something that the people, as a community, should decide on. It should not be done according to the decision or wish of only one person, or one group," Lastimosa told reporters during an informal press conference at the North Cotabato provincial gymnasium in Amas District in Kidapawan City.

She said she is for the conduct of an absolutely free democratic process — a referendum — to determine if voters in the proposed Bangsamoro territory wants their respective communities to be grouped together under a Bangsamoro government.

The government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front aims to establish an MILF-led Bangsamoro entity, to exist under the umbrella of Philippine sovereignty, based on the October 15, 2012 Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro, and the March 27, 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB).

It took both sides 17 years of painstaking negotiations to complete the CAB, the final peace deal between the government and the MILF.

Lastimosa said she had witnessed how armed conflicts hit some parts of her hometown, Tullunan municipality in the second district of North Cotabato, while she was still in elementary.

She said lasting peace will bring in development and prosperity in troubled southern communities.

“And peace should start right in ourselves, within us. We have to be at peace with people around us and, as a community, be at peace with other communities as well,” Lastimosa said.

A rousing welcome greeted Lastimosa in her homecoming to North Cotabato last Tuesday.

Lastimosa, also known as “MJ,” hails from Sibsib area in nearby Tulunan town in the 3rd district of the province.

The welcome honor for Lastimosa, who will represent the country in the 2014 Miss Universe pageant, was organized by the office of North Cotabato Gov. Emmylou Mendoza.

Local folks are hopeful the 26-year-old Lastimosa, who is a veteran of beauty pageants, would have a good chance to win the Miss Universe crown.

She won the title “Mutya ng Tulunan” during her hometown’s fiesta in 2003 and was also crowned in 2008 as “Mutya ng Davao” while she was studying in one of the schools in Davao City.

Some 10,000 people from Tulunan and other parts of the province gathered at the provincial capitol grounds in Amas District to greet Lastimosa.

Her homecoming coincided with the “Sayaw Kutawato 2014,” a provincial ethno-modern group dance contest at the provincial gymnasium also inside the capitol compound.

More than a dozen groups from North Cotabato’s different towns joined in the dance contest, which is part of the activities meant to highlight the forthcoming September 1, 2014 centennial anniversary of the province.

Lastimososa arrived at the capitol in Kidapawan City via a helicopter from the Davao City airport, straight from her Manila-Davao flight.

Mendoza told reporters the positive impact of Lastimososa's win to the local eco-tourism climate is now being felt.

"We are so proud of her. She placed the province in the pedestal of the country's eco-tourism chart," Mendoza said.

Lastimososa, in an impromptu message, said she is thankful to the Mendoza administration for supporting her participation to the 2014 Binibining Pilipinas pageant.

She called Mendoza her second "hands-on mother," as she repeatedly urged North Cotabato residents to pray she would win the 2014 Miss Universe crown.

Lastimososa also called on North Cotabato's youth to study hard and rise from the daily challenges they face in their schools and in their homes.

"Dream on, keep on, keep struggling. That is life, sometimes we're down, and sometimes we gain something good we can be proud of. I shall always be a proud child of Cotabato," Lastimososa said.