

The Philippine government sees bright prospects in the unification of two Muslim rebel groups that have been fighting for autonomy in the Philippines south.

This developed as the the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) formally activated and put into operation the so-called Bangsamoro Coordination Forum (BCF) which shall serve as the mechanism for the MNLF and MILF to “coordinate their movements toward achieving the aspiration of the Bangsamoro people towards just and lasting peace, and peaceful resolution of their problems.”

This development was relayed by Ambassador Sayyid Kassim El-Masri, Organization on Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Special Envoy, during a meeting Wednesday with Government representatives headed by Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Teresita Quintos Deles.

Deles said in press statement that the meeting was attended by Egyptian Ambassador Mahmoud Mostafa who currently chairs the OIC-Peace Committee on Southern Philippines (PCSP), Hassan Alabdein, Charge d’Affaires of Saudi Arabia and vice chair of the OIC-PCSP, Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Undersecretary Jose Lorena, National Security Council Deputy Director General Zenonida Brosas and Department of Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary Julius Torres.

The Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Process said El-Masry officially furnished Deles in the meeting with copies of the meeting report and terms of reference of the BCF which were signed by him as OIC envoy, Mohagher Iqbal as representative of the MILF and Randolph Parcasio as representative of the MNLF.

According to the meeting report, the BCF shall serve as the mechanism for the MNLF and MILF to “coordinate their movements toward achieving the aspiration of the Bangsamoro people towards just and lasting peace, and peaceful resolution of their problems.”

The meeting report said both parties reiterated their “firm belief that unity is indispensable to the success of the Bangsamoro struggle and that there are no basic differences between their fronts as both are seeking to achieve peace, justice and fair solution to the problem facing the

Bangsamoro people.”

In her statement, Deles expressed thanks to the OIC and welcomed the activation of the coordination mechanism between the two Moro fronts.

“This is a positive and very welcome development especially at this juncture of the peace process when the Bangsamoro Basic Law is being deliberated in Congress. We are talking of the same territory and the same people, as such it is good to know that the MILF and MNLF have agreed to consolidate their efforts for peace and development so that all of these can be integrated in the BBL,” said.

“We look forward to the participation of both the MILF and MNLF in the establishment of the Bangsamoro,” Deles said. “We are appreciative of the efforts of the OIC in making this possible.”

Functions of the BCF

As per the terms of reference signed by the two parties, the BCF shall perform the following functions: 1) Provide the venue to discuss issues and concerns confronting the Bangsamoro people, including finding common grounds between the 1976 Tripoli Agreement – 1996 Final Peace Agreement and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in order to harmonize the two peace tracks and preserve the gains contained in these agreements which the MNLF and MILF mutually recognize and respect; 2) Coordinate the efforts of the MILF and MNLF in order to consolidate their efforts towards achieving the Bangsamoro people’s aspiration for just political solution and lasting peace and inclusive development; and 3) Conduct consultations with other sectors of the Bangsamoro society including the Ulama.

It shall be composed of 20 members, with equal representation of ten members each coming from the MILF and MNLF. They are expected to meet every three months, with the first meeting scheduled on October 26-27, to be presided by the OIC Secretary General or his representative or the chair of the OIC-PCSP.

A joint secretariat for the BCF will also be created for administrative and coordinative tasks, composed of three members each from the MILF and MNLF. Technical and legal working groups may also be organized as necessary.

The meeting on the activation of the BCF was convened Monday, October 13 by El-Masri upon the instruction of OIC Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani. Aside from Iqbal, the MILF delegation included Abhoud Syed Lingga, Abdullah Camlian and Jun Mantawil.

Meanwhile, aside from Parcasio, the MNLF delegation included Muslimin Sema, Mujahab Hashim, Alvarez Isnaji and Utto Salem Cutan. Mostafa and Alabdein also joined the meeting. The Parties signed the meeting report and terms of reference the following day, October 14.

Nur Misuari, MNLF founder, but now a fugitive after the deadly attack on September last his MNLF faction staged in the predominantly Christian city of Zamboanga that left 300 people dead and thousands displaced, was apparently not invited to the BCF meeting on Monday.

The creation of the BCF has initially been agreed upon in a meeting between MILF Chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim and Misuari in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on May 18, 2010 through the invitation of the OIC Secretary General. Succeeding meetings of the Parties on the establishment of the BCF were held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on December 6-7, 2011 and June 12 this year.

The MILF has signed peace deal with the Philippine government on March 27 this year, while the MNLF entered into a similar agreement in 1996. However Misuari's group felt they were shortchanged in that peace pact and that they were left out of the peace agreement the government has signed with the MILF where wider political and fiscal autonomy was granted to the latter. This prompted Misuari's faction to lay siege to Zamboanga City where they earlier sought to raise the "Bangsamoro Republic" flag at City Hall.