

Dozens of evacuees driven away from their villages at the border of Maguindanao's North and South Upi towns by clashes between feuding members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) started returning home Friday, optimistic a low-level truce crafted by both sides will prevent recurrence of hostilities.

The feuding MNLF groups, one led by Salipada Sumael of Barangay Ganassi in North Upi, and the other by Basco Omar, of Barangay Lamod in South Upi, last fought each other on May 17, causing the displacement of 327 Moro and Teduray families.

Barangay officials said the returning evacuees want either the Philippine National Police, or the 1st Marine Brigade, which has jurisdiction over South Upi, to put up a detachment in Barangay Ganassi to ensure that members of the two groups will neither carry guns, nor encroach on each other's territories again.

Representatives of the two groups agreed to a ceasefire Wednesday night during a dialogue brokered by the chairman of the largest group in the MNLF, Cotabato City Vice-Mayor Muslimin Sema.

John Magno, chief of staff of the Office of the Regional Governor (ORG) in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, said relief workers are now attending to the evacuees, some of them still languishing in school campuses.

The two rival MNLF groups have agreed to hold a traditional "kanduli" soon to seal their reconciliation..

The term kanduli means thanksgiving feast in the Maguindanaon dialect, a traditional rite marking the reconciliation of feuding clans, or to highlight celebrations on community accomplishments, or political feats.

The two groups fought at the border of Barangays Ganasi in North Upi, and Lamod, South Upi

in a series of encounters apparently precipitated by the May 13 elections.

The two camps supported different candidates for common elective positions South Upi.

Magno said relief workers on Thursday started dispersing rice, canned goods, and instant noodles to the evacuees, procured out of the special purpose funds of the Office of the Regional Governor.

Lawyer Makmod Mending, Jr., local government secretary of ARMM, said the municipal governments of North and South Upi have been tasked to monitor the compliance by the two groups with the preliminary security agreement enjoining both sides to disengage to enable evacuees to return to their homes.

Mending said ARMM Gov. Mujiv Hataman has asked the regional police office to deploy more policemen in the areas where the two groups fought last week to prevent a repeat of the encounters.