

Philippine government and rebels sign peace agreement

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The government of President Benigno Aquino and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front signed a landmark peace agreement Oct. 16 aimed at ending four decades of conflict on the Philippines' southern island of Mindanao. More than 100,000 people have been killed in the conflict as the mainly Muslim south has sought greater autonomy within the Christian majority country.

Negotiators from both sides signed the "framework agreement" at the presidential palace in Manila, with Aquino and Moro Islamic Liberation Front chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim.

"Today, I extend the hand of friendship to the Filipino people. ... Today we are here to put an end to the adversarial relationship between the Bangsamoro and the Philippine nation," Murad Ebrahim said. Bangsamoro is the name of a new autonomous region in Mindanao created by the agreement.

"We signed an agreement that can finally see genuine, lasting peace in Mindanao," Aquino said.

Witnesses at the signing included Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, who helped broker the deal, and foreign diplomats.

The chief political officer of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front cited the contribution of Central Mindanao's oldest Catholic radio network in helping generate support for peaceful means of resolving the decades-old uprising.

Ghadzali Jaafar, the group's vice chairman for political affairs, announced live over the radio that despite the station's being owned by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, it keeps on sharing generously in the "struggle" to educate the public on the need to support the peace overture between the government and Southern Mindanao's Moro communities.

The leftist Moro-Christian People's Alliance, a national interfaith network of Muslim and Christian religious leaders, Moro people's organizations and civil libertarians, welcomed the signing "with guarded optimism." A similar peace deal brokered in 1996 fell apart as interest from the central government ebbed and local cronyism crept into the southern region.

"The Aquino administration's public relations-oriented statements tend to create the illusion that a centuries-old conflict is finally resolved. It creates an illusion and concocts false hopes in the public's minds that peace has finally been achieved," the group said in a statement.

The government's sincerity in forging a lasting agreement with the Moro people will be put to the test when negotiators go into the fine details of the final peace deal, it added.

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