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Filipinos seek answers on peace deal between government, Muslim rebels

by Simone Orendain by Catholic News Service

Cotabato, Philippines — Some Catholics in Cotabato are taking a wait-and-see attitude toward the recently signed preliminary agreement between the Philippine government and the country's largest Muslim rebel group.

While welcoming the end of fighting that has claimed more than 120,000 lives and displaced millions more over 40 years, Christians in the region are awaiting details of the deal and said they want an explanation about what the future holds for them.

Their questions revolve around the agreement's framework for the establishment of an autonomous Muslim region in the southern Philippines, where the majority of the country's Muslims live.

Sr. Bernadette Baldemor, a member of the Oblates of Notre Dame based in Cotabato, said she wants to know more about what the agreement entails.

"We see the need, most especially to educate the mass base, both Christians and Muslims," she said, "because there are misunderstandings." She said rumors were circulating that Catholics would have to leave the area.

Based at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Cotabato, near the rebel group's administrative camp, Baldemor said the church community has scheduled several consultations with those familiar with the framework agreement to give the public a better understanding of it.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front had been in on-again, off-again negotiations with the government for 15 years until the agreement was signed Oct. 15. The organization has held fast to its demand to the right

to self-govern in their claimed ancestral land, which has steadily diminished in size since European Christians colonized the region beginning in the 16th century.

The preliminary agreement sets guidelines for creating an autonomous region to be called Bangsamoro, which means Muslim nation. The term was coined by the rebels to refer to themselves and all other indigenous people of the area they claim.

Under the agreement, the new Bangsamoro entity would have the power to form a ministerial government, levy taxes and share in benefits from natural resources. The central government would have exclusive powers related to national security, foreign relations and monetary policy.

Negotiations were to continue for two months more on the sharing of wealth and power, intergovernmental relations and normalizing the lives of people in the region. If a deal is reached on the issues, the timeline agreed to by both parties calls for a comprehensive final agreement to be in place in 2016.

The region, beset by fighting and traditionally ruled by elite families, is the most impoverished part of the country.

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On the sprawling grounds of the cathedral in Cotabato, Chris Guerzon and his wife lit a vigil candle. The retired 57-year-old former military official was deployed to the region in the mid-1970s to fight the rebels.

The Guerzons said they wanted to learn more about what to expect from the deal. Guerzon called the agreement "a good first step between the government and the MILF because it will put an end to the conflict."

"There should just be peace all around, so we can progress," he added.

After leaving the military, Guerzon tried to start a small business, but he said it was too dangerous to travel outside of the city to increase sales because of the fighting in rural areas. With a few years to go before he can begin receiving social security benefits, Guerzon said he now works as a security guard.

On his way to a recent evening Mass with his family at the cathedral, Eric Matias, 31, also said more information about the agreement was needed. He worked for years at a humanitarian agency that supported displaced residents in the conflict zone.

"From the grass-roots level, they need to explain to people in layman's terms so they could understand all about what's in the framework," Matias said.

Jordan Lauban, 42, moved to Cotabato when he was child after his family was displaced at the height of the rebellion in the 1970s. Working as a driver-for-hire and waiting for a customer in the cathedral parking lot, Lauban said he hopes the agreement will open new opportunities for his business, which was limited to runs to the city airport because of the conflict.

"If there's peace in Mindanao, more people would travel to here," he said. "A peaceful existence is really what we're hoping for, especially us Muslims in Mindanao."

Lauban sees the agreement as the only way for the region to pick itself up.

"We hope that this is it, that we'll really have peace, so there won't be any more unrest in our lives," he said.

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