



MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT

Central Committee

Office of the Chairman



Ms. Ellen Cruz, FOCAP President, Distinguished Guests, Fellow speakers, Friends from the media, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Allow me to greet you in our universal greetings of peace: Assalamu Alaykum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh.

Good morning to all of you!

I am greatly honored to join a panel of distinguished guests today at this annual event of the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (FOCAP). I thank the FOCAP president, Ms. Ellen Cruz, for inviting me to speak on the prospects for the peace process in the Bangsamoro, as well as the issues on security in the aftermath of the Marawi Siege on May 23 last year.

Without doubt, the imminence of peace in the country, especially in the Bangsamoro, appears bright. Early signs seem to point to one direction that the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel appears closer. However, like most seasoned revolutionaries, we welcome the same with guarded optimism, given our hard experience in the past that efforts to implement signed peace agreements in this country practically ended in dismal failures.

These failures happened in spite of the fact that we have done our part of the bargain. We have signed the peace agreements such as the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) which provided for the political solution to the Bangsamoro Problem in Mindanao; we have demonstrated our steadfastness in adhering to the ceasefire agreement; we have boldly displayed our unwavering commitment to the normalization process by undertaking a symbolic decommissioning of 75 weapons that included crew served weapons and 145 of our combatants as early as June 16, 2016; and we have complied fully on the guidelines the United Nations on the prohibition of child soldiers that led to the delisting of the MILF from the roster of organizations employing child soldiers.

To put into proper perspective at what stage exactly is our peace process right now, let me quickly outline the road map indicated in the Annex on Transitional Arrangements and Modalities of the CAB. Briefly, the following are the important milestones: The signing of the CAB; the creation of a body called Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) to draft the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL); Enactment of the BBL by Congress; Ratification of the BBL in a Plebiscite in the area of the proposed Bangsamoro political entity; Appointment of members of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), which acts as executive-legislative authority during the transition; and finally, the establishment of the Bangsamoro Government through a regular election.

To recall, the CAB has been signed in 2014 and greeted with great euphoria and the promise of a legislation that will implement fully the content of this peace agreement.

The implementation of the CAB thru the BBL is the product of 17 long years of negotiation and we feel that its pursuit through the legislative track is a must. However, we do not see the pursuit of charter change in the country as contrary or inimical to the implementation of the peace agreement. In fact, we view it as complementary. What needs stressing is the need to sequence the two with the enactment of the BBL preceding the shift to Federalism. This is also in compliance with the CAB as the Annex on Transitional Arrangements and Modalities provides for the possibility of amending the Constitution, if needed, so as to comply with the peace agreement. Also, as a matter of practical consideration, the legislative track is a simpler process and does not require much time as compared to a charter change that both requires longer period and involves a far more complex process. Besides, we may have the opportunity to learn valuable lessons on the broader concept of decentralization and inter-governmental relations in the implementation of the BBL if we proceed with it and apply these lessons in the shift to federalism. On our part, we are of course conscious of the fact that constitutional change, even if it occurs after the enactment of the BBL, would still radically impact on the BBL as the change in the Constitution would necessarily change also national laws, and the BBL will certainly be affected, so as to comply with the new charter. It is important, therefore, that the shift to federalism should also respect and takes into account our peace agreement with the government. What would be ideal is to allow in this charter change the entrenchment of the peace agreement in the Constitution as well as the perfection of some of the

expression of the right to self-determination of our people which is not possible under the existing national legal framework.

Under the current administration, what has radically changed is the appreciation that the implementation of the peace agreement may proceed thru the passage of the BBL even if there are reservations for some provisions as requiring a constitutional amendment. However, what is constitutional or not, in the final analysis, is a matter left to the final determination of the Supreme Court. In this regard, we are elated by the repeated pronouncements of the living framers of the 1987 Constitution that the BBL is constitutional because it is about social justice. Our hope is that this time around we will be able pass the BBL more expeditiously, thus allowing us to focus all our energy into nation building.

Mind you all, in the long years of our struggle, we have faced many challenges, as a result of repeated failures of government to implement peace agreements. To recall, the failure to implement the Tripoli Agreement in 1976 resulted in the split of the MNLF and the rise of the MILF. The failure to implement the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) resulted in the birth of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). In our case, the failure to sign the 2008 Memorandum Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) gave rise to the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Our failure to pass the BBL in 2015-2016 led to the birth of the now infamous Maute Group that ultimately led the Marawi Siege.

Since 2008, the MILF has been under tremendous strain from the challenge of keeping the faith of its members to the peace process that appears to have no end in sight. The campaign against the leadership of the MILF has been pursued persistently by radical elements from within and from without. The common argument of these elements is, "Why should we continue to pursue a peace process when government has never faithfully implemented a peace agreement with the Moro people"?

More often, these extremists would cite the failures of government to implement the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, the 1996 FPA, the failure to sign the MOA-AD in 2008, and the failure to pass the BBL. Many people especially the young are attracted and drawn into the ranks of the extremist like the Maute Group and Jemaah Islamiyah.

While it is clear to us that the ISIS do not care about our national liberation agenda as they are in pursuit of jihad on global scale or everywhere, the frustration and resentment of the people especially the young over the apparent failure to implement signed peace agreements is blinding them from discerning the real motives of these extremists.

The fight against violent extremism in the homeland is real. As the battlefields in the Middle East are cleared, and the bases of the ISIS are constricted, we will increasingly find them in our midst as they seek new strategic grounds where the hold of government is weak such as in Mindanao. Last year alone, in our effort to control a faction of the BIFF that has sworn allegiance to ISIS, we lost a total of 24 men in our drive to defend our communities in the Liguasan Marsh. We know we cannot decisively win the war against extremism if we cannot win the peace in the halls of Congress. The peace agreement must be implemented and the BBL must be passed so that we can then show a concrete and demonstrable result of the peace process that we have engaged in in the last 18 years of our struggle.

Today, we stand at a crossroad. We can all be part of a defining moment in our history by rewriting our narrative as a people. While colonialism divided us, but today our people have the great resolve to correct the past by addressing the historical injustice committed against us. More importantly, we are not only capable but great inspired to forge ahead by weaving together a shared future for our next generation. Together, we can make this happen, Insha Allah! We will start to build a better future where all of us can live in peace while remaining proud of our heritage and respectful of each other's identity

Thank you and good day!

Speech of MILF Chairman at The FOCAP's Prospects for The Philippines Forum, February 20, 2018,
Pan Pacific Hotel, Manila