



SPONSORSHIP SPEECH ON THE BANGSAMORO BASIC LAW

By Deputy Speaker Pangaliam M. Balindong

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Plenary Hall, House of Representatives

Honorable Speaker and my esteemed colleagues who are committed to just and lasting peace. Assalamu 'alaikum, good afternoon!

I stand before you in full support of House Bill No. 4994, also known as the Bangsamoro Basic Law or BBL. This piece of legislation could be truly instrumental in ushering a new era of sustainable peace and development in Mindanao and the Philippines.

In the 2011 World Development Report, former World Bank president Robert Zoellick noted that not one low-income country that is coping with recurrent cycles of weak governance, poverty, and violence has achieved a single Millennium Development Goal (MDG). The underlying problems are too real in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Conflict violence has robbed the region of its growth potential, leaving communities, structures -- and even institutions -- devastated, with our people continually unjustly suffering under practically permanent impoverished conditions. This kind of status quo cannot be acceptable.

Notwithstanding recent improvements in governance in the ARMM, the region still lags, economically and socially. The region has the lowest contribution of a mere 0.9 percent to the country's gross domestic product or GDP. This is glaringly disproportionate to the rich natural endowments of the

region. Based on 2012 statistics, the ARMM has the highest poverty incidence across regions at 55.8 percent, while the national average is much lower at 25.5 percent. In other words, more than half of the population in the ARMM have annual incomes too low to bring them across the poverty threshold of P20,517.

The Human Development Index, or HDI, is a United Nations measure of well-being, particularly in the areas of life expectancy, education, and per capita income. Using this index confirms what we already know: that ARMM provinces have an overwhelmingly huge backlog and so much catching up to do. Out of the 79 provinces covered by the Human Development Report 2012/2013, the five provinces composing the existing ARMM were among the poorest. The provinces of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Tawi-Tawi were ranked the bottom three, while Lanao del Sur and Basilan placed 70th and 62nd, respectively.

Surely, governance is key to uplifting the socioeconomic conditions faced by the people of Muslim Mindanao. Therefore, we need to ensure that the BBL grants authentic, meaningful, and functional autonomy to Muslim Mindanao so that it can effectively build institutions that will secure our identity and posterity, while being responsive to the unique needs of our people. Institutions especially pertaining to the administration of justice and education should be developed in the context of the cultures and traditions in the Bangsamoro. We need to develop the regulatory practices that will ensure the effectiveness of the Sha'riah justice system, the Madrasah system of education, and the Islamic banking system.

The existing ARMM is likened to a local government unit or LGU. We should remember, however, that the creation of the autonomous region has a more specific mandate under the 1987 Constitution, and so it deserves a distinct status from which emanates greater flexibility in governance and the exercise of autonomy. Notably, the BBL provides greater fiscal autonomy to the Bangsamoro, especially with the block grant that shall be automatically appropriated just like the Internal Revenue Allotment or IRA. A direct consequence is that the Bangsamoro Government will no longer be treated like a line agency that annually subjects its budget to the scrutiny and approval of Congress. The Bangsamoro Parliament will decide on its own how it should appropriate and utilize its own resources to support the development priorities of the region.

While the draft BBL was initially a product of negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or MILF, the House Ad Hoc Committee on the Bangsamoro has extensively engaged different stakeholders and legal experts in the discussion of issues concerning the proposed BBL. No other legislation has gone through a process that is as inclusive and consultative. The Ad Hoc Committee on the BBL, under the chairmanship of Honorable Rufus Rodriguez, conducted a total of 47 meetings close to half of which constitutes regional public hearings held in different parts of Mindanao, and some in Luzon and the Visayas.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished colleagues, it is critical for and incumbent on us to bring peace in Mindanao, particularly in the Bangsamoro area. War continues to rob us of many things—our homes and livelihood, the lives of our people, and opportunities for the improvement of individuals, families, and entire communities. War continues to cause instability in our day-to-day life and cripple businesses that can provide employment opportunities. War continues to disrupt service delivery and prematurely depreciate the conditions and value of our properties and assets.

The problem of conflict violence has far-reaching and sometimes and sadly, permanent, effects. Conflict violence can easily spread and embroil neighboring territories to become breeding grounds for networks of violent radicals and organized crime.

War is costly. Based on estimates, the Mindanao war has resulted in an estimated P640 billion economic loss over a period of 31 years (from 1970 to 2001) in terms of damages to business and properties, and potential investments in the region had the security situation been better. Annually, this amounted to about P20 billion in economic losses. Moreover, the National Government incurred about P73 billion in combat expenses from 1970 to 1996 for the war with the MNLF. In 2000 alone, the all-out war policy under Estrada Administration cost the national government P1.3 billion. The cumulative cost in terms of economic losses and expended public funds would definitely be much bigger if a more recent inventory is made.

The war between the government and MNLF from 1970 to 1996 claimed nearly 120,000 lives. Yes, 120,000 Filipino lives — half of which came from the MNLF, 30 percent from the military, and 20 percent from that civilian population that did not even want the war in the first place.

War also sacrifices the well-being of communities of individuals and families with very simple wishes -- to be able to fend for their families, to give their children better futures than theirs, and to live in peace. A total of 982,000 Filipinos were displaced in 2000 during the all-out war with the MILF. About 600,000 people were also displaced during the fighting in 2008 when the controversial Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain or MOA-AD was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

A World Bank-supported report of International Alert, the Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System or BCMS reveals that the two biggest causes of conflict in the Bangsamoro from 2011 to 2013 are associated with shadow economies and political violence. Shadow economies mean, among others, illicit weapons and drugs market and kidnap-for-ransom operations. Shadow economy-based activities accounted for over one-fourth of the total recorded violent conflicts from 2011 to 2013.

However, it is political violence that exacts the largest human cost. It has astoundingly huge costs in terms of death, injury, and displacement, not all of these costs can even be quantified. Rebellion-related violence was mostly due to armed clashes between government and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters or BIFF and remnants of the MNLF.

Still, we can note that violence associated with the MILF has significantly dropped with the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012. Subsequently, the number of people killed, wounded, or missing due to rebellion and insurgency has also been declining. Putting an end to the GPH-MILF conflict will impact positively on the prospects for peace and stability across the Bangsamoro.

I call on you, my colleagues in Congress to support the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. While the MILF is in the forefront of the peace negotiations, the BBL is not for the MILF alone. As policy framers, we need to have a mindset that this new Organic Act is for all the Bangsamoro people and for all Filipinos.

Former GPH Panel Chair, now Supreme Court Justice Marvic Leonen said, "We negotiate for peace because we know that we mutually have more serious enemies to face: poverty in an era of potential

prosperity, powerlessness in an age where only mutual cooperation can help us hurdle ecological challenges of potentially catastrophic proportions, and ignorance in the midst of tremendous intellectual and technological possibilities.”

To this, I add that the time to do all these, is NOW.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished colleagues, we never had, and we do not have, the luxury of time. Our worth as leaders will be measured by the futures that we give our people and especially, our children. From now on, let our vision of Bangsamoro be that all fathers, in full dignity, can provide for their families, all mothers can sing lullabies to their babies not amidst gunshots, but amidst the peace and serenity of nature, and children can live their childhood as childhood should be lived -- in gleeful play, in earnest study, and in the nurturing embrace of family and community.

The time is NOW. Because tomorrow, callousness and indifference can take over hope. And after that, anger and hatred can take over callousness and indifference. I echo the words of Alan Paton in his conscience-provoking book, Cry, the Beloved Country, “I have one great fear in my heart, that one day, when they are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating.”

The time is NOW. NOW.

Thank you for your support, and good afternoon. ©