

Mohagher Iqbal's Opening Statement during the Official Launching Ceremony of the GPH, MILF Implementing Peace Panels

Mohagher Iqbal | 15 August 2016

Negotiation is a part of man's everyday life

Today is a very auspicious day for all of us. This day we formally launch the Implementing Peace Panels of the GPH and MILF to signal that the peace process is back on the formal track and the Parties are ready as ever to proceed with vigour, commitment, and determination. They are also ready to work as partners both in their supervisory responsibilities over the various mechanisms or infrastructures of the peace process as well as in the implementation of their bilateral or respective obligations set forth in signed agreements. I will deal with them in more details later in this statement.

I am truly elated and happy that the women and men, sitting across us are known for their good credentials and deep commitment to the peace process. While it is not and cannot be a precondition that those appointed on the opposite table are acceptable or known to the other party, because that is the prerogative of the appointing party, yet it is very much desirable or preferable that they are acceptable to the other party. I dare say today that we have the best of two worlds: first, on the other side are women and men of high qualification and experiences and second, they are known to us very well. In fact, we are dealing with some of them almost regularly even before they were appointed.

It is a well established lesson learned in peace-making that trust and confidence are important factors for the fast pace and success of the endeavour. If the peace process had achieved so much during the Aquino administration, it is because both President Benigno Aquino III, Secretary Teresita "Ging" Deles, and their peace negotiators headed by Prof. Miriam Ferrer-Coronel were held in utmost respect by us in the MILF. I am sure they also viewed us in the same light and perspective. Like us, they are problem-solvers and not engaged in counter-insurgency operations of manipulation, deceit, and double-talk, all aimed at undermining the process and frustrating the resolution of the conflict.

Under the Duterte administration, I expect more success stories. I have the gut feeling that the final closure of the Bangsamoro Problem or Question is in the offing. First, as stated, the members of the GPH Implementing Peace Panel are mostly if not all are from Mindanao, and we are confident that they are personally committed and interested to settle this conflict without delay. Second, Secretary Jesus Dureza, aside from being a veteran negotiator, is also from Mindanao. He has been a personal friend of long standing; in fact, during the early part of the negotiation in 1997-1998, he voluntarily offered to help the MILF on legal matters. Third, President Duterte also hails from the same region, in fact, he has a Moro blood running in his veins. More importantly, he is not anti-Moro, and according to one of his closest friends, whom we talked to, when he commits something he fulfils it. And fourth, his policy towards the problem and the BBL is unequivocally clear and straight from the heart, and I quote: "I would like to tell you and I'm telling now to the

Republic of the Philippines, nothing will appease the Muslim, the Moro people if you do not give them the BBL".

This launching today will formally kick-off the next phase of the peace journey from where the two Parties had left off. This specifically refers to the two-track implementation of the agreement of the Parties contained in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). The first track is the passage of the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which is a unilateral responsibility of the GPH. The participation of the MILF in this internal legal process of the government is indirectly through the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) and the occasional informal meeting between the Parties' Principals. The second track is a bilateral implementation of all the aspects of the normalization process by both the GPH and MILF and with the participation of the international community, which journeyed with us through thick and thin over a period of many years. The stint of Malaysia, as third party facilitator, started in 2001 upon the official invitation of then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who travelled to this bustling City of Kuala Lumpur on the same year to convey the message of invitation. Secretary Dureza played a prominent role in this endeavour. By any yardstick, Malaysia has delivered and surely its facilitation is considered exceedingly above par. Other international players, who brought with them their expertises, experiences, and resources, joined the process also upon the official invitation of the Parties.

Rightly described, the peace panels are strictly not on negotiation mode because all the agreements specifically the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) and the CAB which contained the political solution to the Bangsamoro Problem or Question are already signed. (I have with me the compilations of those agreements, in two volumes: from 1997 to 2010 as the first, and from 2010 to May 30, 2016, as the second). Thus, the decision of the Parties to change the nomenclature from negotiating peace panels to implementation peace panels is indeed a master's stroke that describes hitherto the focal responsibilities of the Parties in a very precise manner. I salute the Parties for their practicability, ingenuity and foresightedness.

However, as a process, negotiation still continues to be pursued by the Parties. Negotiation is an indispensable part of man's everyday life, because it is a method to settle differences. Without this process, man's life including those of families would be in shamble. Either there is hell inside every home or there is complete deafening silence because someone is dictating. The reality is that the wife negotiates with the husband on what refrigerator to purchase, what kind of bicycle a son wants, what dress a daughter prefers to buy, etc. Negotiation is a way out of the danger zone of controversy or endless internal strife. Applied in our peace process, there are issues even in the course of implementation that are viewed differently by the Parties, which they cannot settle, even with their strong partnership; so the only way is to fix them with the presence of the third party facilitator. That is still in every way negotiation. After all, the peace panels, the Malaysian facilitator, as well as most of the mechanisms of the peace process continue to exist until the Parties sign the "Exit Agreement" when all the agreements of Parties are implemented by them.

As per our experience, and confirmed in other conflict resolution models, the harder, nay dangerous, part of every peace process is in the implementation, because the devils lay in ambush in the details. Oftentimes, the spoilers of the peace process ceaselessly plot to redirect the flow of the peace process through various dubious influence operations. They are often dressed in

sheepskins but in actuality they are wolves ready to tear apart the achievements of the Parties earned for the last 17 years of hard and harsh negotiations. This requires the utmost vigilance of the Parties. The other way to stave this off this threat is to be very consistent with all signed agreements. Any marked deviation from the basic principles, say the real concept of autonomy, will result in incoherence, and consequently, the political entity created will be lower than the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) or merely at par with it. If that happens, where is the sensibility of the MILF negotiating with the government for 17 years only to get something less or like the ARMM? We had better accepted it earlier on because it was offered to the MILF three times but we rejected them every time it was presented.

The BBL, therefore, must first be CAB-compliant; meaning, it captures the letter and spirit of this agreement. But this does not mean we cannot improve or enhance the proposed law. We can revisit other agreements especially the GRP-MNLF Final Agreement of 1996 and any provision thereof that can enrich or strengthen the BBL or are not implemented can be adopted. And second, the proposed law should embody the legitimate interests and aspirations of the Bangsamoro people and all other residents of the proposed political entity. This inclusivity should gear more on equal opportunity and protection of the law and secondarily on representations of people or groups. We are not solving here the MILF problem or the MNLF problem or Nur Misuari's problem or Al Haj Murad's problem, but the Bangsamoro Problem or Question, which the Parties patiently tried to address since Day One of their negotiation that started in January 1997. The forest is more important than the individual tree but the best, nay ideal, situation is when we take care of the interest of the forest and the individual tree, as well. The bad scenario is when a hitch-hiker carries more load or wants a lion-share of the "harvest" than those who spent the best of their lives in the struggle that claimed the lives of 150,000 people since 1972.

Finally, let me assure all and sundry of the firm commitment of the MILF to pursue peace with the GPH and to overcome with determination all challenges ahead of us, so that the progress, development, and justice that are long denied to our people shall be realized soon. Certainly, it is only through a regime of peace with justice that we can ensure the peace, stability and progress of this country. It is not progress or development but repression, oppression, and exploitation that force people, wrongly or otherwise, to resort to unwanted measures. We see them in today's real world. They are almost everywhere.

Thank you and good morning to all!

Mohagher Iqbal's Opening Statement during the Official Launching Ceremony of the GPH, MILF Implementing Peace Panels At the Palace of Golden Horses in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on August 13-14, 2016

