

Datuk Othman bin Abd Razak, Chief Facilitator,  
Mohagher Iqbal, Distinguished Chairman of the MILF Peace Negotiating Panel,  
Members of the MILF Peace Negotiating Panel  
Members of the GRP Peace Negotiating Panel,  
Their Excellencies, Ambassador Horie Masahiko (Japan), Ambassador Boyd McCleary (UK),  
and other Members of the International Contact Group,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines, I would like to thank H.E. Prime Minister Najib Razak for his kind message of support to and confidence in the peace negotiations between the GRP and MILF.

Also, I would like to thank everyone for your presence today, as we open up a new chapter in the GRP-MILF peace talks. I am excited and brimming with optimism because we have, at last, reached this day when we formally resume the peace negotiations.

Last year, just two days before Christmas, I was appointed Chairman of the Government peace panel tasked to resume the stalled negotiations with the MILF. It was a challenge that was very daunting to accept, and yet too important to refuse. And when I decided to take the challenge, many eyebrows were raised and shoulders shrugged. Doubting Thomases spoke of doom even before I could make my first move. Many believed that nothing could be done anymore to salvage the talks.

But with the help of the Malaysian Facilitator, particularly Datuk Othman bin Abd Razak, and after putting up much faith and goodwill on each other, we are now formally back on track.

We have a reason to celebrate the milestone we are about to build today. But the task ahead of us is still great. The challenges we have to surmount remain high. There is a lot of work to do.

But the thought that we have reached this far keeps my hopes high that we will hurdle the challenges. I believe – and I am sure that we all share this optimism – that we will be able to

forge a peace settlement that is just, lasting, acceptable, and truly beneficial to the Muslim Filipinos in Mindanao, and to the entire Filipino people.

We shall eagerly take our first steps today, with the discussions on the renewal of the mandate and composition of the IMT; the establishment of its civilian protection component; the renewal of the AHJAG Interim Guidelines; and the setting of agenda for the upcoming talks. And we all know that all great journeys always begin with the first steps.

As we formally commence our talks, may we sustain the momentum of trust and the inertia of faith that have propelled us to this day. To this end, I thank the Facilitator and all our friends, the International Contact Group, who have wholeheartedly pledged their time and expertise to the cause of peace.

Thank you everyone for walking with us this path towards peace.