

# Doubts arise over crucial Philippine autonomy law after rebel clash

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Work to set up an autonomous Muslim region in the Philippines to end a 45-year insurgency has been suspended and may be abandoned altogether because of a clash in which more than 50 people were killed, legislators said on Wednesday.

A top official described the clash between police and rebels on Sunday, which shattered a three-year ceasefire, as a "misencounter" during a bid to arrest two militants who had taken refuge with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters.

The rebels, operating in the south of the largely Roman Catholic country, have agreed to disarm in exchange for an autonomous government.

But a Senate hearing on a Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) setting up the special zone has been suspended and could languish indefinitely.

"This incident may be used as a reason not to pass or really delay this BBL," Senate President Franklin Drilon said in a radio interview.

"If we don't pass this, we will be in the same situation as where we were before. There will be no solution to the turmoil."

The Muslim insurgency has killed 120,000 people, displaced 2 million and stunted growth in the poor but resource-rich south.

The Senate had hoped to pass the legislation creating the zone with various economic and political powers, before the end of March. President Benigno Aquino wants arrangements completed before his term ends next year.

Forty-four police commandos were killed and 12 wounded in the firefight on Sunday. Police said at least eight rebels were also killed.

Senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr., head of the committee holding hearings on the bill, who suspended proceedings this week, said the Senate needed to know the facts before continuing efforts "to ensure true and lasting peace".

"The peace process cannot proceed under the threat of violence, under the threat of war," he said.

Two senators who co-authored the bill have withdrawn their support, dimming its prospects even further.

"Now that some authors of the bill have withdrawn, it is clear that its passage will be delayed," Drilon said.

Ebrahim Murad, chairman of the MILF, said his group was committed to the peace process, which Malaysia has helped to broker, and said it was investigating the clash.

"Until what happened is established with credibility and integrity, the said incident will weigh down our current efforts to bring peace to our homeland," Murad said in the statement.

(Editing by Robert Birsell - <http://feeds.reuters.com/~r/Reuters/worldNews/~3/gjnfVNaKW54/story01.htm> )

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