

60 days for peace talks

President Duterte has set a 60-day timeframe for the peace talks he is seeking to revive with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), urging its leaders to accept the new negotiations he has offered.

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“Take advantage of that 60 days. If it succeeds, I would like to thank God first, and the Filipino people and the military and the police for their understanding,” Duterte said in a speech at a motorcycle clubs’ convention in Legazpi City, Albay on Saturday.

But the President did not say when the 60-day period would start. He also wants the CPP’s armed wing the New People’s Army (NPA) to lay down its arms during the negotiations – a condition that the rebels are likely to reject.

Duterte reiterated his invitation to exiled CPP founder Jose Maria Sison to come home to hammer out a deal.

“I am talking to Sison now. It is an off-and-on thing and probably the military and the police have misgivings,” Duterte said.

He stressed that he is neither a soldier nor a policeman, and his “fundamental” duty as President “is to see to it that my country is peaceful.”

“Just recently I created a small window of 60-day proposal to Jose Maria Sison. I need not go there, but I invite you to come here and I will answer your traveling (expenses) including fare, billeting and food,” Duterte said.

Sison has been in exile in the Netherlands since his release from prison in the late 1980s.

Duterte promised the safety of NPA members during the new negotiations.

“Those members of the guerrilla fronts can designate a place where you can keep your firearms and inform us where they are and you are free to go anywhere you want without carrying arms,” the President said.

“I will give you complete freedom to move. I will not harass anyone and I will order the military and the police to be nice to you,” he added.

The communist insurgency has raged for half a century and killed more than 40,000 people. On-off negotiations to end the revolt have been brokered by Norway since 1986.

In February, a Norwegian diplomat met Duterte to try to persuade him to restart the negotiations that Duterte had scrapped in anger over what he considered the duplicity of the communists.

Earlier this month, Duterte ordered his Cabinet to work on a truce to enable talks, but the communist rebels have rejected any preconditions.

Ending the conflict was among Duterte’s priorities when he took office in 2016. But he abandoned peace efforts in November, infuriated by repeated NPA’s attacks during the talks.

In early April, Duterte said the rebels must agree to a ceasefire, stop extortion activities and abandon their proposal of a coalition government, before resuming talks.