

BAGUIO CITY, February 24 – The House committee on local government approved in the committee level House Bill (HB) 5595 that seeks to create an autonomous region in the Cordillera pursuant to the mandate of the 1987 Constitution.

The Cordillera Administrative Region was organized by virtue of Executive Order (EO) No. 220 which was signed by former President Corazon C. Aquino on July 15, 1987 and it was meant to prepare the region for autonomous status. It is composed of the provinces of Abra, Benguet, Mountain Province and Baguio City from Region I and Ifugao, Kalinga and Apayao from Region II.

Mayor Mauricio G. Domogan, who chaired the Third Autonomy Act Drafting Committee (TAADC) that produced the salient provisions of HB 5595, said the swift approval of the Cordillera autonomy bill in the committee level is an initial victory for Cordillerans who are longing for the attainment of self-governance.

"Autonomy will allow Cordillerans to have greater control of the region's resources with lesser restraint from outside forces which will mean that we can decide on what will be good for the development of our region," Domogan stressed, citing that the establishment of the autonomous regional government will be effective in administering the affairs of the Cordillera without supervision and control from the central government pursuant to the present set up.

According to him, the issuance of water rights, exploration permits, mining permits, among other sensitive permits, being issued by the national government will be downloaded to the regional government since the regional officials should be more aware of prevailing condition in the region unlike the present set up where there are numerous questions on water rights and mining permits issued by the central government due to lack of coordination and consultation with the affected indigenous peoples.

Vergara explained that once autonomy will be achieved by the Cordillerans, there will be greater volume of infrastructure projects that will be downloaded to the regional government similar to what is being enjoyed by the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) which is receiving around P12.3 billion from the national government over and above the appropriations for the regional line agencies and the local governments comprising the region.

For his part, Kalinga Gov. Jocel C. Baac, chairman of the Regional Development Council (RDC) in the Cordillera, said the more than six years of preparing the Cordillera for autonomy is now paying off with the hope that Congress will not water down the contents of the autonomy bill so that the people will be encouraged to ratify it into law when submitted to them in a plebiscite in the future.

HB 5595 entitled "An Act Creating An Autonomous Region in the Cordillera" was filed in the House of Representatives last December 6, 2011. It was originally authored by Baguio City Rep. Bernardo M. Vergara, Kalinga Rep. Manuel S. Agyao and Apayao Rep. Eleanor Bulut-Bengtang. One day after the bill was filed, Ifugao Rep. Teodoro Baguilat, Jr. and Mountain Province Rep. Maximo Dalog, Sr. decided to join the authors of the bill to show the unity of Cordillera congressmen in the quest for the long overdue regional autonomy.

Negros Occidental 2nd district Rep. George Arnaiz, chairman of the House Committee on Local Government, said the Cordillera autonomy bill will be scheduled for second reading and for plenary debates the soonest after Valenzuela City Rep. Magtanggol Gunigundo moved that all the members of the committee will be co-authors of the bill.

"The Cordillera autonomy bill has been twice approved in the House during the previous Congresses. As a matter of tradition, bills that have been previously approved and debated upon in the House will be passed to ensure its speedy enactment," Leyte 2nd district Rep. Sergio Apostol said after moving for the approval of the Cordillera autonomy bill in the committee level thereby foregoing any debate on the matter.

In the Senate, Senator Aquilino Pimentel III filed Senate Bill (SB) 3115 entitled "An Act to Establish the Cordillera Autonomous Region" as the counterpart bill for HB 5595 to ensure the realization of the region's quest for self-governance since he believes in the concept of autonomy as a vehicle to speed up development in depressed communities.

Article X, Section 15 of the 1987 Constitution provides for the creation of the autonomous regions of Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures and other relevant characteristics within the framework of the Constitution, the national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Country.

Earlier, the RDC-CAR requested President Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III to certify the Cordillera autonomy bill as a priority administration measure since the establishment of an autonomous region in the Cordillera will guarantee robust economic growth, infrastructure, agriculture and tourism development as well as help people move out from the shackles of poverty because of greater control of the region's resources by the autonomous regional government.

The Cordillera autonomy bill is composed of 17 articles and 173 sections that evolve around five major principles such as the establishment of a permanent regional identity for the Cordillera, no reduction in the benefits and powers of local governments, nationally paid officials and employees will continue to be nationally paid, grant of a subsidy to the Autonomous Regional Government by the national government in the amount of P10 billion for the first five years and P5 billion for the succeeding five years and the continuous support of the national government to the regional government after the expiration of the 10year subsidy period.

The third attempt for regional autonomy came after the RDC-CAR made autonomy as one of its overarching concern in order to realize more development efforts to be brought to the rural communities in the country.

The Cordillera had its first attempt to achieve autonomous status on January 30, 1990 but it was only the province of Ifugao which voted in favor. On March 7, 1998, the second autonomy law was subjected to a plebiscite but only the province of Apayao ratified it.*