PH, US to continue talks on IRP framework agreement

Philippine negotiators said on Thursday that substantive discussions with their US counterparts for a framework agreement on the increased rotational presence (IRP) of American troops and defense equipment in the country had been narrowed down to five key provisions, which they hope to thresh out in the next round of talks.

At the end of the two-day negotiations between the Philippines and the US held at the Department of National Defense in Camp Aguinaldo, panel head Defense Undersecretary Pio Lorenzo Batino said there were “more focused discussions” on Articles II (Scope), IV (Agreed Installations/AFP Facilities), VI (Prepositioning of Defense Equipment, Supplies and Materiel), VII (Ownership) and VIII (Security) of the proposed framework agreement.

“While we have narrowed down the discussions to these substantive issues, there are still gaps in our positions. Both panels scrutinized all the proposals that were put on the negotiating table,” Batino said after the fourth round of talks.

According to Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary Carlos Sorreta, spokesperson for the Philippine side, “there were still differences on key issues,” and hopefully both sides could come up with an understanding when negotiators sit down again for the next round of discussions, the date and venue of which have yet to be determined.

“During the last four rounds of negotiations, we were able to cover a large number of provisions of the proposed framework agreement,” Sorreta said. “However, there remain major details of the substantive issues which both sides need to iron out, and we want to make sure that this agreement would be mutually beneficial.”

During the talks, the Philippines and the US also discussed the possibility of putting in place a mechanism for regular bilateral consultations to ensure the effective implementation of the framework agreement.

Last August the Philippines and the US began talks for a possible framework deal that will cover the hosting of larger American military presence in the country within the purview of the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Visiting Forces Agreement.

The framework agreement is expected to boost the defense capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines amid growing territorial threats, increase training of its troops and improve disaster response. ###