

Abubakar converted into Army camp

Camp Abubakar, the main base of the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is no more.

To end persistent talk of returning to the MILF its bases captured by the military in 2000, President Arroyo yesterday ordered a Philippine Army unit to transfer its headquarters to the sprawling former rebel base - to be known from now on as Camp Datu Sinsuat - in Maguindanao province.

Mrs. Arroyo announced the camp's new name during a visit there yesterday under heavy security.

"Life is back to normal now here. There is no more Camp Abubakar," she said.

Camp Datu Sinsuat will be the new home of the Army's 603rd Infantry Brigade, whose headquarters is in Pigkawayan town several kilometers from the former rebel camp.

Mrs. Arroyo said this will "show to the entire Philippines and to the whole world, especially to doubters that we might return the camp to the rebels, that Camp Abubakar is entirely in the hands of the Republic of the Philippines."

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Located in an area surrounded by the towns of Barira, Buldon and Matanog, Camp Abubakar — along with other MILF camps in other nearby provinces — was captured by the military in a massive offensive in mid-2000 ordered by then President Joseph Estrada.

However, the Arroyo administration's series of interim peace agreements with the rebels drew suspicions that the MILF would get back its bases, which Malabang denied.

Mrs. Arroyo reassured local

residents that any peace deals the government makes with the MILF would be governed by the law.

"If we look for ways (to achieve) peace, it is always under the sovereignty of the Philippines, always under the constitutionality of the Philippines," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"So Gov. Manny Piñol will no longer imagine that there are MILF (rebels) marching in the camp," Mrs. Arroyo joked, referring to the North Cotabato governor who had criticized the ad-

ministration's agreements with the rebels. North Cotabato was one of the provinces infested by MILF rebels.

Of 2,000 hectares comprising the former Camp Abubakar, the 603rd Infantry Brigade will occupy 50 hectares, and the rest would become part of Barira, Buldon and Matanog towns.

Mrs. Arroyo handed out checks totaling P6.7 million to provide livelihood assistance to local residents and for infrastructure improvements in the former rebel base.

The money came from a US-AID-funded government livelihood assistance program to help former MILF rebels live normal lives again.

Mrs. Arroyo was accompanied by First Gentleman Mike Arroyo, several Cabinet members, US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, his wife, officials from the US Embassy and the US Agency for International Aid.

Bad weather forced Mrs. Arroyo to take a four-hour drive to Datu Sinsuat from Cotabato City and back over rough roads made more difficult by three days of heavy rain.

The presidential party was supposed to fly from Cotabato City's Awang airport by helicopter.

"This trip is nothing like anywhere in the world. The visit was an adventure," Ricciardone said, upon arriving at the former rebel base.

In his brief remarks to local residents, Ricciardone expressed Washington's "full support" to the Arroyo administration's peace initiatives with the MILF.

"I'm very, very pleased to confirm to you, Madame President, as your government reaches an agreement with the Moro Islam-

ic Liberation Front, my government is prepared to stand with you in supporting that agreement," he said.

"So we wish the government success and the people of Abubakar and the MILF success in coming together in establishing a firm peace agreement that would hold and bring prosperity and peace to the people of this area."

Ricciardone, whose last post was Turkey, delighted local residents by greeting them in Arabic. "It is a pleasure to meet the people of Abubakar," he said. - Marichu Villanueva, John Unson