

GMA won't stop hog farm construction

By KATHERINE ADRANEDA

Bishops who met with President Arroyo failed yesterday to secure from her a cease-and-desist order on behalf of the Sumilao farmers who are urging San Miguel Foods Inc. (SMFI) to stop the construction of a hog farm in the contested 144-hectare property in Bukidnon.

Bishop Broderick Pabillo, head of the Church Task Force on Sumilao designated by Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, and Cagayan de Oro Bishop Antonio Ledesma met with Mrs. Arroyo over breakfast at the Konesko Hotel in Cagayan de Oro City.

The President met with the

bishops before her scheduled inspection of the Laguindingan Airport and attendance at the 78th anniversary celebration of Misamis Oriental at the provincial capitol.

"I am disappointed that the Office of the President (could not issue) the cease-and-desist order," said Pabillo, who is also head of the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), after their meeting with the President.

Pabillo and Ledesma reportedly discussed their

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apprehensions on the continuing construction of SMFI, a subsidiary of San Miguel Corp., at the 144-hectare disputed property in Sumilao with the President, who earlier promised to return the controversial land to the Sumilao farmers after she issued an order last Dec. 18 which revoked the conversion order of the property and reverted the estate into agricultural use.

They reiterated to Mrs. Arroyo their request for the Office of the President to immediately issue a cease-and-desist order to stop further developments on the property pending the distribution of the land to the farmers.

However, the President reportedly told the bishops that she still cannot issue the cease-and-desist order but promised them that she would confer with Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Sergio Apostol.

The bishops also expressed disappointment over the way the Office of the President sent the copy of the Dec. 18 order to the SMFI.

Contrary to what had been reportedly promised by Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye that he would personally deliver the copy of the order to SMFI, the document was instead sent to SMFI via registered mail last Dec. 19.

"I am disappointed that the Office of the President still continues to drag its feet on issuing a cease-and-desist order. I am deeply disappointed at the unnecessary delay in even the simple delivery of the SMFI copy of the Dec. 18 revocation order despite the reassurances of Secretary Bunye," Pabillo said.

Lawyer Arlene Bag-ao, counsel of the farmers, said that the request for a cease-and-desist order has been made even prior to the issuance of the Dec. 18 order.

She claimed that the cease-and-desist order should have been issued under the same arrangement.

"After the receipt of the Dec. 18 order, the Office of the President made us understand that they were studying the issuance of the cease-and-desist order. How come until now that is still what they are saying? How long does the Office of the President need to study the issuance of a cease-and-desist order?" Bag-ao said.

AkbayanRep. Risa Hontiveros-

Baraquel said that this incident only fuels doubts about the sincerity of Malacañang in returning the 144-hectare Sumilao land to the farmers.

"How can we believe that the Office of the President is serious about putting the Sumilao property under agrarian reform when it has done nothing, neither to commence the implementation of the order nor stop SMFI from pursuing its illegal construction?" she said.

"The Office of the President has been very silent even after SMFI announced to the public that their hog farm will be operational starting this month through its paid ad last Dec. 27. The paid ad was a blatant defiance of the OP order," she also said.

For their part, the Sumilao farmers, who have set up a makeshift camp outside the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) regional office in Cagayan de Oro since Jan. 3, announced their plan to launch simultaneous protest actions to pressure the government to yield to their demand.

The Sumilao farmers said they would launch the mass actions because they have grown wary over the lack of action from the DAR and the Office of the President.

Bag-ao reiterated that while the DAR refused to move, SMFI has been continuing its construction on the property, which means that the government is losing land everyday.

Meanwhile, there are reports that SMFI's mother-company San Miguel Corp. has offered jobs and land to the protesting farmers, mostly Higaonons, in an effort to settle the land dispute.

Agrarian Reform Secretary Nasser Pangandaman was quoted to have said that SMC president and chief operating officer Ramon Ang made the offer to Pabillo during a telephone conversation, also during the meeting with the President in Cagayan de Oro City yesterday.

Pangandaman said Ang offered to give farmers another piece of land in Sumilao and jobs in the modern piggery being developed by SMFI in the contested estate.

But the farmers reportedly declined the offer, saying that they would continue their fight to regain ownership of the property which they claimed as their ancestral land.