

# GMA to AFP: Defend every inch of RP territory

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo ordered the military and the police yesterday to "defend every inch" of the country from Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels who launched "sneaky and treacherous" attacks on

several towns in Lanao del Norte that left more than 30 people dead and forced the evacuation of thousands.

"As your commander-in-chief I have ordered the Armed Forces of the Philip-

pines and the Philippine National Police to defend every inch of Philippine territory against MILF forces, and immediately restore peace in the affected areas in Lanao del

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Norte," a grim-faced Mrs. Arroyo said in a recorded television statement.

"We will not tolerate and will crush any attempt to disturb peace and development in Mindanao," Mrs. Arroyo added.

"Again, I assure the Filipino people that the government will defend them at all costs against any move by any group that will disrupt our aspirations for a genuine and lasting peace not only in Mindanao but in the whole country," Mrs. Arroyo said. "I am with you in peace. We are all in this together."

After a late afternoon meeting of the National Security Council, officials challenged the MILF leadership to show sincerity by turning over the rebel leaders responsible for the carnage in Lanao del Norte and other parts of Mindanao.

"It is incumbent upon them to show good faith," Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno said last night at a press conference after the NSC meeting.

"If that good faith would not materialize, this will cause doubts among our authorities," he said.

"Value of dialogue is always there but parameters of dialogue must be changed to suit conditions on the ground for those sincere with peace and sift out those (who are not sincere)," Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said at the same briefing.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza said the NSC meeting was scheduled to take place today but "events overtook us" so it was held a day earlier.

"No one will be allowed to hide behind the peace process and escape the might of the government here because this is really to protect the helpless civilians who have been unduly attacked," Dureza said. "They have crossed the line."

Reacting to Mrs. Arroyo's order, the Kilusang Mayo Uno said the President "is the real butcher of the Bangsamoro people."

"The toiling masses and oppressed people in Mindanao are now caught in a war field that Arroyo and cohorts have instigated in the first place," said KMU secretary-general Wilson Baldonaza.

A day before Mrs. Arroyo issued her orders, Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Secretary Hermogenes Esperon Jr. quietly flew to Kuala Lumpur presumably to meet with Malaysian facilitators.

When contacted by The STAR, Esperon declined to disclose details of his trip except to say that it was official and that he intended to be back in Manila today.

He said the Supreme Court's temporary restraining order on the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain as well the fighting in Mindanao is affecting efforts to jumpstart the negotiations.

Esperon admitted the problem with dealing with the MILF is that it is an irregular force that has no clear accountability or chain of command compared to institutionalized forces like the military.

"But we still need to negotiate or the alternative is unthinkable - more bloodshed," he said.

"The peace process will always be given primacy. However, we view the recent incidents with grave concern. We must get to the bottom of these very disturbing incidents," Esperon said in a statement.