

# GMA names herself anti-narcotics chief

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo named herself as the country's anti-drug overlord yesterday, declaring an all-out war against illegal drugs amid the scandal involving government prosecutors, anti-narcotics agents and families of suspected drug dealers.

Mrs. Arroyo said she needed to step in to save the judicial system from being corrupted by narcotics traffickers.

"I will temporarily act as the (anti-drug) czar, or overseer of the war against illegal drugs," Mrs. Arroyo announced before a Cabinet meeting at Malacañang attended by Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) chairman Vicente Sotto III and Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) chief Dionisio Santiago.

The President told the Department of Justice (DOJ) and PDEA to stop trading accusations and focus on the war against illegal drugs.

Mrs. Arroyo had ordered five state prosecutors to go on leave as the government probes claims they were offered bribes to dismiss complaints against the three "Alabang Boys" who were allegedly involved in drug trafficking.

"Governments that delay action against illegal drugs, or regard it as a routine police matter, do so at their own peril,"

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Mrs. Arroyo told the Cabinet meeting.

"A country swash with illegal drugs is a country compromised, its law and institutions order tainted and corrupted," she said.

Mrs. Arroyo said her order to put on leave the five state prosecutors was meant to show "to all how serious the government is in the campaign against the drug problem."

"It is in this tragic context that the government should map out its all-out war, an unyielding and unrelenting war against illegal drugs and their devil merchants," the President said.

She said the campaign would be a "trinity against illegal drugs" composed of law enforcement, judicial action, and policy-making, which would be a comprehensive policy consisting of prevention, enforcement, rehabilitation and after-care.

Mrs. Arroyo said the controversy over the Alabang Boys' case had been a wake-up call for law enforcement agencies to "jolt us into action."

The President declared she would push for an "unyielding and unrelenting war" against drugs.

Sotto, for his part, said the campaign would not be easy with authorities up to now trying to get a clear picture on the extent of the drug problem and at the same time, contending with a low resolution rate of cases filed.

Sotto added Mrs. Arroyo would relinquish the job once the controversy over the Alabang Boys case is resolved.

He said the President wanted the investigation into the allegations of bribery against the state prosecutors finished by Jan. 27.

The state prosecutors ordered to take leave are alleged to have sought to release the three suspects in return

for millions of pesos in bribes.

PDEA officials led by Maj. Ferdinand Marcelino, chief of the agency's Special Enforcement Service, testified to a congressional inquiry against the prosecutors last week, alleging that money changed hands to release the suspects.

Justice Undersecretary Ricardo Blancaflor led the prosecutors in filing a leave of absence yesterday before his boss, Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez.

Blancaflor said he would leave it up to Gonzalez to extend his five-day leave of absence.

"If on Monday he (Gonzalez) tells me 'you still have to prolong your leave,' then I will take it from there," he said.

Blancaflor said he would continue his concurrent duty as spokesman for the Anti-Terrorism Council and chairman of the Extrajudicial Killings Task Force.

Gonzalez had noted the alleged irregularity in Blancaflor's action of coursing the draft order to release the three suspects through his office.

Gonzalez earlier suspected that it was Blancaflor who was working for the freedom of the three suspects.

He said Blancaflor is now the subject of an internal investigation by the DOJ's National Bureau of Investigation (NBI).

NBI special task force chief Arnel Dalumpines said all the prosecutors involved in the case have submitted their affidavits for the investigation.

Dalumpines said they are still awaiting word from PDEA's Marcelino to submit his sworn statement.

Marcelino, through his lawyer, earlier said he would submit a detailed narration of the events today.