

# GMA wants zero political killings

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo yesterday ordered the Philippine National Police (PNP) to bring political and media killings down to zero amid fresh criticisms on the country's human rights situation.

In her speech at the commencement exercises

Turn to Page 9



of the PNP Academy in Silang, Cavite, she cited the reduction in crime rates, including bank robberies and kidnappings, in the country.

"We must bring political killings to zero, including assassinations of government officials and media personalities," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She directed PNP chief Director General Jesus Verzosa to give protection to Davao City-based broadcaster Elgin Damasco and investigate the death threats against him.

Damasco, a broadcaster for dxDC Radio Mindanao Network (RMN), went on leave after receiving threats on his mobile phone. He has reported extensively on the abduction, rape and murder of Rebelyn Pitao, the daughter of local New People's Army leader Leoncio Pitao.

He also earlier reported on alleged military abuses. Unidentified men were reportedly seen casing the RMN station.

There were reports that Mrs. Arroyo might meet with Damasco when she arrives in Davao to address the national conference of local government officials.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists earlier said the Philippines remains among the world's most dangerous places for journalists, while the European Union Parliament had issued a resolution expressing concern over the unexplained killings in the country.

Earlier this month, a broadcaster in Cagayan de Oro was shot and seriously wounded by unidentified men. Last year, seven journalists were assassinated.

Mrs. Arroyo told the new PNPA graduates that there is still a lot of work to do despite the achievements of their predecessors.

"Our people have given you the rare opportunity to develop your rare potential. Go now and give back what you received by keeping the people safe. And as you keep the people safe you will be able to carry out through your careers your theme today of justice, integrity and service - essential values towards a strong globally competitive republic," she said.

On Wednesday, Mrs. Arroyo spent some time in San Juan, Batangas with journalists covering the Palace beat.

The last gathering of this sort was in August last year in Pampanga.

However, Mrs. Arroyo declined to answer questions on politics and other sensitive issues.

"This is getting to be interview-y," she told this reporter when asked about the move of the Ombudsman to file charges against 17 public works officials in connection with the alleged rigging of a World Bank road project.

Usig in the regional level so we will be able to assist (in resolving political and media killings)," said Verzosa, who was also present during the graduation rites.

The national Task Force Usig is headed by Director Raul Bacalzo, who is also the chief of the DIDM and the Anti-Illegal Drugs Special Operations Task Force.

On orders of President Arroyo, the PNP formed Task Force Usig in May 2006 to help address and solve numerous killings of members militant groups and media.

She also approved the creation of Task Force (TF) 211, to assist the police in investigating the killings. TF 211 includes the PNP, National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the Department of Justice, and the Department of the Interior and Local Government.

"There are still challenges we have to address. We must bring political killings to zero, including assassinations of government officials and media personalities," the President said. - With Cecilie Suerte Felipe, Edith Regalado, AFP