

31 killed in clashes as GMA tours south

By JOHN UNSON

COTABATO CITY – Twenty-three Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels, seven soldiers and a militiaman were killed in two separate clashes as President Arroyo toured central Mindanao Friday.

MILF rebels continued firing mortar shells on Army positions on Friday night and yesterday morning, according to Col. Marlou Salazar, commander of the Army's 601st Infantry Brigade.

About 60 MILF guerrillas attacked a military patrol near the town of Mamasapano in Maguindanao, about 10 kilometers from the provincial capital where Mrs. Arroyo was scheduled to visit, according to Lt. Col. Jonathan Ponce, spokesman of the Army's 6th Infantry Division.

Seven soldiers were killed and five others were wounded in the ambush in Barangay Bialong, he added.

Twenty MILF rebels were killed after soldiers from nearby detachments engaged the ambushers in a shootout, Ponce said.

Four rebels, three of them teenagers, were reportedly wounded after 40-mm grenades exploded near their positions.

Earlier, three MILF guerrillas and a member of the Citizens' Armed Forces Geographical Unit were killed in fighting in Barangay Sta. Clara in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat province, Ponce said.

Last Friday, Mrs. Arroyo presided over a dialogue on Malacañang's solid waste

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management campaign with local officials led by Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) at the Maguindanao provincial capitol in Shariff Aguak town.

ARMM officials assured Mrs. Arroyo of their support for the national government's anti-pollution thrusts in support of the international community's effort to address global warming.

However, Ponce said the spate of encounters in Mamasapano were not in anyway related to Mrs. Arroyo's visit.

"It's a known fact that these MILF rebels have been roaming around in hapless farming communities every day as part of their 'foraging missions,' which are (part of) their effort to gather food and mult money from unarmed people," he said.

Mrs. Arroyo was aware of the fighting nearby during her visit to Maguindanao, according to a provincial official who was part of the welcoming party.

"The President appeared unmindful of her security; anyway the fighting was far away," the official said.

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu said government troops started the fighting when they attacked a community where the families of some MILF rebels lived.

"The bodies of some slain soldiers

were only retrieved hours later," he said. "The military triggered the fighting when they entered the area."

Kabalu accused the military of "playing games" and undermining any prospect of returning to peace negotiations with the government.

"This attack only proves they want to create confusion on the ground at a time when the government is trying to restart the talks," he said. "But we cannot negotiate under such an atmosphere."

The military said the attacks were headed by MILF commander Ameril Ombra Kato who led his men in attacking Christian communities in central Mindanao last year.

The attacks killed dozens of people and displaced about 600,000 others.

Last year's fighting was triggered by a Supreme Court ruling that outlawed a draft peace agreement being offered by the Arroyo administration to end four decades of rebellion in Mindanao.

The accord would have granted the MILF control over large areas of Mindanao populated by Christian settlers.

Mrs. Arroyo subsequently suspended the peace talks and ordered the massive military offensive.

However, she has since announced that the government was prepared to resume talks with the MILF and appointed a new set of negotiators.

- With Jaime Laude, AFP, Reuters