

'Rapidly annihilate Abus'

By ROEL PAREÑO

ZAMBOANGA CITY – President Arroyo yesterday ordered the "rapid annihilation" of the Abu Sayyaf extremists in Mindanao following last Wednesday's bloody gunbattle in Basilan that left over 50 people, including 23 soldiers, dead.

Mrs. Arroyo also warned the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) guerrillas who joined the Abu Sayyaf in the fighting that they would be hunted down despite the prevailing suspension of offensive military operations (SOMO) with the Muslim rebel group.

"The war against terror must be pursued. The annihilation of the Abu Sayyaf must be done," Mrs. Arroyo told a command conference of security officials led by Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief Gen. Victor Brado at the Western Mindanao Command (Westmincom) headquarters here.

Teodoro said the President tasked the military and all security forces "to complete all efforts in annihilating terrorism" in Basilan, coupled with vigorous civil-military operations.

"The instruction of the President (is that) the war against terror must be pursued. The annihilation of the Abu Sayyaf must be done," Teodoro said.

Mrs. Arroyo tasked the AFP to coordinate its efforts with local government units to vigorously bring economic development and social services, particularly to areas where the Abu Sayyaf is known to operate.

Mrs. Arroyo also gave instructions to review the results of military operations against the Abu Sayyaf to enable the AFP, particularly Task Force Trillium in Basilan, to improve their strategy against the extremists.

She said the recent military operation would serve as the road map in the fight against terrorism "in its bigger form with the emphasis on rapid result."

Part of the instructions of the President was to ensure

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security for major development projects to prevent the Abu Sayyaf and rebel groups from hampering government programs.

"The President's orders are to feed the populace and convince them that joining the Abu Sayyaf is the wrong thing to do and joining the government will bring peace and development to Basilan," Teodoro said.

The President also visited the Westmincom headquarters where the remains of the 23 soldiers, including two junior officers, who were killed in last Wednesday's gunbattle were accorded funeral honors.

Mrs. Arroyo condoled with the relatives of the slain soldiers and handed them P250,000 in assistance. She also visited the Camp Navarro General Hospital and extended cash assistance to the wounded soldiers.

What were you doing?

Teodoro warned that the government also knew which MILF groups had aided the Abu Sayyaf in the fighting and warned that the government would go after them as well.

"Those who were involved in the attacks will also be included among those to be neutralized and arrested," he said, referring to the MILF.

"There are cases we have already filed against them and we have filed protests" with the international group monitoring the government's ceasefire with the MILF, Teodoro told reporters.

Some 23 soldiers and 31 Abu Sayyaf bandits were killed when the military overran a suspected training camp run by the extremist group in Basilan.

MILF fighters have been identified as helping the Abu Sayyaf in the fighting despite the

SOMO with the government.

The Marines also demanding a full explanation from the MILF on why its fighters were helping the bandits.

Marines' spokesman Capt. Alden Gwen Amargo said the MILF would have a lot of explaining to do before the Joint Committee on Cessation of Hostilities (JCCH) in the complaint filed by the AFP.

Marine Brigade Commander Brig. Gen. Rustico Guerrero said he received assurance from the MILF representatives in the joint ceasefire committee panel that there would be no MILF guerrillas joining the gunbattle.

"Gen. Guerrero who established contact with the MILF panel received an assurance that none of their fighters will be involved," Westmincom commander Maj. Gen. Ben Dolorfino said.

But the troops were surprised to find out that the MILF's Bangsa Moro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) 3rd Brigade led by Commander Asid Salih based in the adjoining town of Al Barka moved in and helped the Abu Sayyaf bandits, he said.

Dolorfino said the MILF force prevented a team of Army Scout Rangers from taking tactical control of "Hill 440" in Barangay Baguindan overlooking the Abu Sayyaf defenses.

Dolorfino said that when elements of the 67th Marine Force Recon moved toward Hill 440 to assist the Scout Rangers, the MILF rebels led by Salih ambushed the responding troops, killing 20 of them.

Guerrero added that the troops were surprised to find women among the Abu Sayyaf bandits who were attacking them.

"A Marine who was fired at shot back and (found that he) killed a female warrior," he said.

Guerrero said the slain female Abu Sayyaf bandit was armed with an M203 rifle grenade launcher. "But her body was not recovered by our troops," he added.



A priest blesses the caskets of some of the soldiers slain by the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan upon arrival at the Villamor Air Base in Pasay City last night.

RUBY SANTOS

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu earlier confirmed that 10 of their guerrillas were killed during the firefight.

But Kabalu said the 10 guerrillas were part of the group that was trying to prevent the Abu Sayyaf bandits from taking refuge into their enclaves when the gunbattle erupted.

Kabalu said government forces attacked the 10, mistaking them to be Abu Sayyaf gunmen.

The MILF said they would lodge a complaint against the AFP before the joint ceasefire committee to investigate the incident.

Teodoro, on the other hand, warned the MILF that if they attempt to use the peace process to shield its fighters who took part in the violence, "then they are countenancing this illegal activity."

Teodoro though said the operations against the MILF in Basilan should not affect efforts to

revive the peace talks.

"We know their command and control in Basilan is loose and the leaders there make their own decisions," he said.

Teodoro did not say if additional forces would be sent to Basilan to help in the operations against the extremists but he stressed that the government side had the "momentum" since they had just captured a major Abu Sayyaf camp.

The Philippine National Police (PNP), for its part, said they will not send additional policemen to Basilan.

"We have enough forces there in Basilan to support the AFP in the operations (against the Abu Sayyaf)," PNP spokesman Senior Superintendent Leonardo Espina said. - With Jaime Laude, Marvin Sy, Cecille Suerte Felipe, John Unson and AFP