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Sunday



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House to obey Rody on Road Board abolition

By JESS DIAZ

The House of Representatives blinked and is now supporting the abolition of the corruption-tainted Road Board, following President Duterte's wish.

"The President has spoken. We heard his message to the House. We will act based on his guidance. As an institution, we will heed the President's call," Majority Leader Rolando Andaya Jr. said yesterday.

With the Road Board controversy resolved, he said the House could "finally concentrate on the scrutiny of the 2019 budget, parked pork and P75-billion DBM (Department of Budget and Management) insertions (in the budget)."

Senate President Vicente Sotto III said he received information that Speaker Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is ready to sign the bill for the abolition of the Road Board, which oversees funds from the Motor Vehicle User's Charge (MVUC) that are supposed to be used exclusively for road maintenance and improvement of road drainage, installation of traffic lights and road safety devices, as well as air pollution control.

The Senate and the House of Representatives are at odds

Turn to Page 8

House From Page 1

on the issue of abolition of the Road Board and Duterte took the side of the Senate in pushing for the abolition of the Road Board, saying revenue from the road user's tax had become a milking cow of corrupt officials.

Sotto said the Presidential Legal Liaison Office should work for the transmittal of the approved copy of the bill for the signature of the President.

However, Andaya indicated that the House would still not send to Duterte House Bill 7436, which proposed the abolition of the controversial agency managing billions in MVUC collections.

"All is well. The public, however, needs to understand not just the abolition phase but also what is sought after that. If the President wants an abolition of the Road Board, let it be a real abolition. No residues. No Three Road Kings," he said, referring to the secretaries of public works and highways, transportation and environment and natural resources who would reportedly control the funds after the Board is abolished.

For him, Duterte should send "a better bill and certify it as urgent."

"The House, convinced of its merits, will approve it without delay," Andaya said.

Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon disagreed with this view, saying there is no valid reason for further delaying its transmittal to the Office of the President.

"The bill should be sent immediately to the President's desk for his action. We should let the President decide. It is a political decision. Since the Senate already adopted the

House version, the House lost jurisdiction over the bill and could no longer validly reconsider the approval of the measure which will abolish the Road Board," he explained.

He added that the Senate's decision to adopt the House version of the bill "rendered a bicameral conference unnecessary."

Andaya said the congressmen are for including MVUC collections in the general fund and are against treating the money as "an off-budget item that will be spent by one person in an un-transparent way." "The proceeds need to be included as a line-item fund in the annual budget of the DPWH in the General Appropriations Act (CAA). This way, the real and full funding level of the DPWH is reflected clearly, unlike today when MVUC spending is segregated and treated as a non-budget expenditure," Andaya pointed out.

He added that the House would prefer "that non-road user activities like garbage collection be stricken off the spending menu."

Over the past years, the Commission on Audit (COA) has consistently noted the Board's apparent non-compliance in the utilization of MVUC funds. Sotto said the body is collecting about P12 billion a year in road users taxes. For this year, he added, COA questioned the use of about P90 billion of the over P160-billion fund.

From 2001 to May 2018, the total collection for MVUC reached P166.18 billion. At least P136.87 billion of that amount have been released.

With the abolition of the

Road Board, Sotto said the collected road users' taxes should be included in the GAA, which has line items and clear dispensation of budget.

Drilon said the abolition of the Road Board is critical in the government's fight against corruption, adding that the body has become a breeding ground for corruption and inefficiency.

The Senate on Sept. 12, 2018 adopted the House version to dispense with the bicameral conference. Later that day, the House rescinded its approval on third reading of its own version.

At that point, however, the only remaining steps to complete the legislative process were the printing and signing of the enrolled copy of the bill as a matter of course and its presentment to the President for approval, Drilon explained.

Last week, the Senate, upon Drilon's motion, unanimously adopted a resolution urging the Office of the President to order the Road Board not to release funds from the MVUC, following the passage of the abolition bill by both houses of Congress.

In 2017, the President called on Congress to abolish the Road Board and transfer its functions to the appropriate department. Both houses responded by immediately passing their own versions of the bill.

According to Budget Secretary Benjamin Diokno, the board still has an unspent MVUC fund of P45 billion.

A list of requests and projects given by Andaya to the media last Tuesday showed that scores of lawmakers and DPWH regional directors and district engineers have asked the Road Board to release P5.3 billion for mostly asphaltting

projects.

In May this year, the House, under ousted speaker Pantaleon Alvarez, passed Bill 7436, entitled, "An Act abolishing the Road Board and providing for the distribution of the motor vehicle user's charge collections, amending for the purpose Republic Act 8794."

The measure was sent to the Senate on May 17. Four months later, on Sept. 12, the Senate adopted the bill without amendments upon learning that the House would recall its approval of it, which the larger chamber did on the same day.

Presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo has said the President would sign any abolition bill that reaches his desk.

Sotto was reported on Tuesday to have sent a copy of the measure to Malacañang, urging Duterte to sign it.

"Let any interested citizen challenge it before the courts," he said.

On Friday, Duterte said he was siding with the Senate on the Road Board abolition.

He added that he was not only for abolishing the agency but also the MVUC, which is in the form of a 100-percent increase in annual registration fees for motor vehicles.

Duterte stressed that MVUC collections have been a source of corruption for lawmakers and other public officials.

If the House does not send Bill 7436 to Duterte, it would take some time before a new measure could be passed and the Road Board could be abolished, unless the President signs the copy Sotto sent him on Tuesday.

Welcome move

Malacañang welcomed Andaya's move to heed Duterte's call to abolish the Board.

"We are pleased to know that the House of Representatives has listened to the voice of the people who have long been outraged by the corruption surrounding the use of the said tax," said Presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo yesterday.

He urged government officials to support the call of the President for a clean government, responsive to the needs of its constituents.

"Let the President's call for a clean and responsive government to the needs of the governed be taken to heart by those who temporarily wield political power so that our country could commence to traverse the path of righteousness and progress so long denied them by those they have entrusted with authority," Panelo said.

Duterte earlier said House leaders, including Andaya, were wrong in presuming that he wanted the Road Users Tax and the Road Board to continue.

The President said he stands by the Senate's position to have the Road Board abolished. He also said that he stood by his earlier pronouncements, made when he assumed office in 2016, that he really wanted the Road Users Tax and the Road Board to be discontinued as it has become a source of corruption.

"Early on, I told them that I really don't like it. But you know politics and the expediency of everything, it (Road Board) is still there until now. And I had a talk with president Arroyo and apparently there was a misunderstanding because all along I really wanted to abolish the road tax and Andaya says now that was...one of those who said that it should be maintained. No, they are

wrong there," he said partly in Filipino during the change of command ceremony of the Philippine Air Force at Villamor Air Base the other night.

He added that he wanted to "communicate my intentions, my plans, my worries, my headache in running the country. You know there's a little bit of a ruckus there in Congress regarding the abolition or the continuance of the road user's tax, board."

"I believe that the Senate has decided the right thing and has stated that the road tax, board must be dismantled. Ever since I assumed office, I've always been wary about this office because it has been the milking cow of people who are corrupt in government," the President also said.

He pointed out that he has questioned the existence of the Road Board, which he described as "nothing but a depository of money and for corruption."

"I side with the Senate and if it comes to a constitutional controversy, the executive department will side with the Philippine Senate and its interpretation of the law that the process has been completed; that it has been sent to the Senate for approval and on time it was signed," Duterte added.

He likewise said that in three years time he will step down from office and that he would just want to do the right thing for the nation.

"In three years' time, I will step down. Do not entertain claims of me perpetuating in office or toying with the Constitution. I do not have that plan and I will not stay a minute longer. I am as...I am in a hurry as anybody else to leave this job. I also get tired," Duterte added. - With Cecille Suerte Felipe, Edith Regalado

AKO BICOL SOLON GUNNED DOWN

STORY BY THE INQUIRER STAFF

Four men opened fire on Rep. Rodel Batocabe, who was running for mayor, as he was leaving a gift-giving event for senior citizens and persons with disabilities at a public school in Daraga town, Albay province, on Saturday afternoon. Lawmakers are offering a P3-million reward for the killers.

A12

FROM A1

DARAGA, ALBAY—Ako Bicol Rep. Rodel Batocabe and his police escort were shot and killed by gunmen after attending a gift-giving activity for senior citizens and persons with disability on Saturday afternoon.

Batocabe died while being rushed to a private hospital in Legazpi City after four men peppered him with bullets while he was leaving the covered court of Burgos Elementary School at Barangay Burgos around 3 p.m., police said.

The third-term party-list representative was running for mayor of Daraga town in the 2019 elections. He was 52.

Malacañang and lawmakers condemned his "senseless killing."

"Proper authorities are now investigating this brazen murder

as we vow to leave no stone unturned in bringing the perpetrators of this heinous act to justice," presidential spokesperson Salvador Panelo said.

The Philippine National Police on Saturday created a special investigation task group to look "into all aspects" of the attack.

"We appeal to the public to immediately report to the police any information that could lead us to the perpetrators and to help us quickly solve this case," said PNP Director General Oscar Albayalde.

Policeman shot first

Batocabe's police escort, SPO1 Orlando Diaz, died on the spot after being shot first, said Supr. Benito Dipad, Daraga police chief.

Five civilian bystanders were wounded. Police identified them as Hayde Non Llorera, Gregorio Mediavillo, Nelia Millenia, Jesus Medes and Loresita Lomerio.



Rodel Batocabe —PHOTO FROM BATOCABE'S FACEBOOK ACCOUNT

The gunmen used the succeeding confusion to escape on foot, witnesses said.

The gift-giving activity was not coordinated with police, which Dipad said was a "very risky thing to do" since the village of Burgos, located 9 kilometers from the town center, was considered a rebel-infested area.

Batocabe's relatives said the lawmaker was not wearing a bullet-

proof vest despite previously receiving death threats through anonymous text messages.

According to sources in the camp of the slain lawmaker, he started using a bulletproof car two weeks ago after a survey showed him to be the leading contender for the Daraga mayoralty post.

Speaker Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo denounced the killing

and called for a speedy investigation to determine the identities of the perpetrators.

"I condemn in the strongest possible terms the killing of an ally and friend ... Nothing can justify his murder and that of his police aide," Arroyo said.

Stained by blood

Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman said he was "completely outraged and distressed" by Batocabe's murder.

"Politics must not be stained by the blood of politicians and partisans," Lagman said.

Senators Sonny Angara, Grace Poe, Nancy Binay and JV Ejerito said they were outraged by the attack.

"This deplorable act of violence has no place in a democratic society like ours," Angara said.

"We exhort authorities to act fast to make the killers accountable. This sorry history in our nation of political vio-

lence must stop," Poe said.

Binay noted that election-related killings have increased in recent months.

A group of 50 congressmen have put up a P3-million reward for the capture of the gunmen.

Batocabe served as vice chair of the committees on natural resources, dangerous drugs, and good government and public accountability.

Even after the House took a holiday break last Dec. 12, Batocabe continued working.

On Dec. 17, he filed four resolutions commending fellow Bicolanos, Miss Universe Catriona Gray and boxing champions Donnie Nietes, Jerwin Ancajas and Johnriel Casimero for their international achievements.

—WITH REPORTS FROM MA. APRIL MIER, MICHAEL LAUCIAN, BEN ANTHONY OSTRIA, CHRISTINE O. AVENDAÑO, LEILA SALAVERRIA, JAYWEE T. GAMI AND MARS ARGUELLES INC



PH secure amid US jitters

Since the Philippines has diversified its relationships with other world powers from its previously US-centric stance, it won't have any problems in case of an eventual withdrawal of American forces from the country, a security analyst said yesterday.

In a radio interview, Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research chairman Rommel Banlaoi noted that the sudden resignation of US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis sent jitters among US allies in the Asia Pacific, including Japan, South Korea and Australia.

Mattis' resignation letter hinted he decided to quit because of policy differences with US President Donald Trump. While Mattis wants to keep close ties, Trump wants to reduce allies' dependence on America, according to the security analyst.

Earlier, Trump ordered the withdrawal of US troops in Syria, saying the war against the radical Islamic State (IS) terrorists has been won.

"Allies, they need to re-calibrate their strategy

and security policy to adjust to the unintended consequences of Trump's decision to withdraw," Banlaoi said.

In the case of the Philippines, Banlaoi said the country should not be concerned over Trump's posture.

We won't have any problems in case there is withdrawal of American forces because we have diversified our relationships.

"We don't have a problem, that's what's good in the approach of President Duterte (in foreign policy). We can be friendly with China and at the same time we are not setting aside our alliance with the US," Banlaoi said.

Besides, he noted that the Philippines is also sustaining close friendship with Japan and strengthening our relationship with Russia, as well as with India and Australia, among other things.

"So we won't have any problems in case there

is withdrawal of American forces because we have diversified our relationships," he said.

US forces regularly come to the Philippines and conducts joint exercises with the Armed Forces of the Philippines by virtue of the existing RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement.

Mutual Defense Treaty

The Philippines and US also have a standing Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) where both nations agreed to support each other if either the Philippines or the United States were to be attacked by an external party.

However, on the heels of increasing maritime friction between the US and China, the Department of National Defense (DND) had recommended a review of the 67-year-old defense pact.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said, in fact, the DND has initially floated the idea of reviewing the MDT during a recent conference in Hawaii.

Lorenzana made the admission after citing a

near-collision incident between US and Chinese warships in the disputed West Philippine Sea.

The incident happened late October involving a US Navy destroyer and a Chinese warship.

President Rodrigo Duterte, in the practice of his independent foreign policy, said the tense situation was due to the rivalry of the US and China which the Philippines should not be part of.

The near miss happened as the military vessel Decatur was conducting what the US calls "freedom of navigation operations" (FoNOP) near two Chinese-held man-made islets in the Spratly chain of the waterway.

China, shortly after, scolded the US for sending naval vessels close to the disputed islands where Beijing has built military installations.

The US and its allies periodically send planes and warships through the area to conduct FoNOP intended as a signal to Beijing of their right under international law to pass through the waters claimed by China. **END**

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Farmers' group: Ex-Air Force chief good pick as PCA head

By Delfin T. Mallari Jr.
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LUCENA CITY—A farmers' group has welcomed the appointment of retired Air Force chief Lt. Gen. Galileo Gerard Kintanar Jr. as chair of the governing board of the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA).

Jansept Geronimo, spokesperson for the peasant group Kihusan para sa Tunay na Repormang Agraryo at Katarungang Panlipunan (Katarungang), on Saturday said Kintanar's military background "need not be considered bad, for as long as he will have a pro-poor vision in reviving the coconut industry."

"This appointment, hopefully, will signal the start of coconut industry renewal, where small coconut farmers are the center and focus of development," Geronimo said in a statement.

Tremendous resources

Kintanar, he said, would have tremendous resources at his disposal once the coco levy fund is released for the benefit of coconut farmers.

"This is something that his predecessors did not have. Hopefully, he will serve the interest of the poor and be able to resist attempts of traditional politicians who may want to dip their fingers [in] the coco

levy fund," Geronimo said.

In appointing Kintanar to the PCA post on Friday, President Duterte said he had asked the members of the PCA board to resign because he was "not comfortable with all the people [in the agency]."

Mr. Duterte said that "historically," the PCA "has been plagued with corruption."

Highest level of despair

With the expected enactment of the proposed coco levy bill, Kintanar would oversee the distribution of a P100-billion fund to coconut farmers.

The levy was collected from coconut farmers by the

Marcos dictatorship.

Geronimo urged the new PCA leadership to immediately address the issues confronting the coconut industry.

"Small coconut farmers are in their highest level of despair, especially now that the price of copra [is continuing] its downward spiral," he said.

Hunger, he said, is increasing among coconut farmers since their buying capacity has been diminished by inflation, low price of copra and low productivity of coconut lands.

"The need for the new appointee to take matters with the highest sense of urgency is paramount," Geronimo said. INQ

7



Rody wants 'clean' PCA board

By EDITH REGALADO

DAVAO CITY — President Duterte wanted a "clean slate" at the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) board free of graft and corruption amid efforts that the almost P100-billion coconut levy fund would be released to its beneficiaries.

Duterte said the PCA board shall then be responsible for the coconut levy fund and he wants its five-member board to protect the fund.

The President also announced on Friday the appointment of former Philippine Air Force (PAF) chief Lt. Gen. Galileo Gerardo Kintanar as the new PCA chairman.

Duterte made the announcement on Kintanar's appointment during the PAF change of command ceremony at Villamor Air Base.

Although Kintanar is more than a year away from retirement, he was replaced by Western Command chief Lt. Gen. Rozzano Briguez.

Duterte stressed he wanted Kintanar to head the five-member PCA board as he earlier asked all its members to resign.

"So I believe that the courtesy resignations are there. And maybe I will just ask him (Kintanar) to help me. He can choose the people he wants there in the coconut authority,"

Duterte said.

The President said he wanted a complete stop to robbing the government and the people of their money, which was the reason why he appointed Kintanar as PCA chair.

Duterte also cited the progress in the move to return the coconut levy fund to the farmers. The fund now amounts to at least P100 billion after interest accrued from its initial amount of P87 billion.

"I believe that they (Congress) are crafting a law which says that the levy money, the coconut levy should be returned to the farmers," he said.

Duterte also said that with the coco levy fund now reaching P100 billion and coursed through the PCA board, he could not trust its former members.

"This is not... nothing about prejudice or prejudgment. I am not comfortable with all the people in that agency for historically, it has also been plagued with corruption. So I have asked them to tender resignation as a matter of courtesy," he said.

Duterte pointed out he needs somebody who is "above the rest of the crowd" to head the PCA board, that was why he chose Kintanar.

Duterte said he conferred with the rest of the Cabinet members, saying he was looking for a candidate to be PCA



President Duterte hands over a token to outgoing Philippine Air Force chief Lt. Gen. Galileo Gerardo Kintanar Jr. during the PAF change of command ceremony at Villamor Air Base the other day.

chair, someone that he could really rely on and trust that nothing, not even a peso, would be lost.

"And I have observed him. I do not know General Kintanar but I chose him to be the chairman of that board. I don't know him. I know that he's a general who chose to retire early. And that is really no cause to worry. It's just a few months. But I told him: I need someone like you and I am eyeing you," Duterte said.

"So when the time comes and if I can get the mechanisms of

how the money will be distributed to the beneficiaries and if I look for somebody I can trust with that money, it shall be the retired General Kintanar," he said.

The President also told Kintanar he would make the announcement for his new appointment.

"I told the general: Would you mind if I make the announcement? It is not premature because the post there is vacant. And if you don't get out from there, I can fire you anytime and I'll replace you," Duterte said.

TODAY

US SHUTS DOWN AS CONGRESS, TRUMP FEUD

WASHINGTON—The US House of Representatives adjourned Friday (Saturday in Manila) without Congress passing a spending deal, assuring a partial government shutdown at midnight as President Donald Trump and lawmakers remain at odds over border wall funding.

Operations for several key agencies will cease in the early hours of Saturday, despite last-ditch talks that continued on Capitol Hill between White House officials and congressional leaders in both parties.

Trump is seeking \$5 billion for construction of a wall on the US border with Mexico. Democrats are staunchly opposed, and the absence of an elusive deal means federal funds for dozens of agencies will lapse at midnight.

It remained unclear how long the shutdown will last. But the optics are bad, as hundreds of thousands of federal employees will be either furloughed or forced to work without pay in the run-up to the Christmas holiday. *Jan 12*

US
From AP

The House is due back in session at noon (1700 GMT) Saturday (1 a.m. Sunday in Manila).

The Senate, meanwhile, remained open late Friday, but there were no signs yet of a breakthrough, and the chamber was quiet.

Senators told reporters that congressional leaders from both parties were negotiating behind the scenes with White House officials including Vice President Mike Pence, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, and incoming chief of staff Mick Mulvaney.

One focus of discussion was the \$1.6 billion in border security funding that was a part of pending Senate legislation, number two Senate Republican John Cornyn told AFP.

But conservatives in the House would likely balk at that figure.

"There's no agreement," congressman Mark Meadows, chairman of the House Freedom Caucus of ultra-conservatives, told reporters as he made his way from Senate meetings to the House.

"There's a whole lot of numbers being thrown around," but a maximum \$1.6 billion for border security "is not acceptable."

Trump was scheduled to fly to Florida late Friday for his Christmas break, but the White House said the president postponed the trip and would remain in Washington in an effort to salvage a spending deal. **AFP**

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TODAY

EX-AIR FORCE CHIEF TO HEAD COCO AGENCY

By Vito Barcelo

PRESIDENT Rodrigo Duterte appointed another former military official to a government post, naming retired Philippine Air Force Chief Lt. Gen. Galileo Gerard Kintanar Jr. as head of the Philippine Coconut Authority.

The appointment was made as Congress was crafting a bill for the return of the multi-billion Coco Levy Fund to Filipino coconut farmers, which had more than P100-billion fund including interests, Malacañang said.

"I want somebody who is really above the rest of the crowd... He has a spotless record..." the President said in his speech during the PAF change-of-command at Villamor Air Base.

"...when we were conferring in the Cabinet, I was looking for a candidate to be the chairman who should be someone where I could rest my hope in him and no single peso would be lost," he said.

The President admitted that even though he did not know much about Kintanar, he was already "eyeing him" to fill the position.

"When the time comes and if I can get the mechanisms of how the money will be distributed to the beneficiaries and if I look for somebody...where the money would not be lost, that person should be the retired General Kintanar," he said.

During the event, the President praised Kintanar for accomplishing the Air Force mission, especially in its efforts to fight insurgency and terrorism.

Under his watch, the PAF in coordination with other units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and other agencies, many terrorists have surrendered or have been arrested, firearms were recovered, a drug laboratory was dismantled, many drug personalities were captured, and millions worth of illegal drugs were seized.

"During his tenure, General Kintanar has proven his commitment to duty as highlighted by his valuable contributions in ensuring security during the rehabilitation of Marawi, as well as the humanitarian and relief assistance during typhoons and disasters throughout the year," the President said.

"All these attest to the exemplary leadership of General Kintanar and the collaborative efforts of the valiant men and women of the Philippine Air Force," he added.

BY

10

PDP: Rody's

tack rules

Back board abolition, members told

The House can now focus on scrutinizing the budget

By Manneel Bordey, Kristina Maralit and Elmer Muzael

The dominant Partido Demokratiko Pilipino (PDP) cracked the whip yesterday as it ordered all its members to rally behind the policy of President Rodrigo Duterte to abolish the graft-prone Road Board.

"In no uncertain terms, President Rodrigo Duterte made it known that the Road Board will have to go that makes it incumbent for those supporting him to follow his position," PDP said yesterday.

PDP vice chairman and Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi said the party which has Mr. Duterte as chairman recognized the necessity to place the Motor Vehicle User's Charge (MVUC) otherwise known as the Road User's Tax under the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) to allow the proper monitoring of the proceeds of the tax as an item in the budget.

Turn to page 2

As an institution, we will heed the President's call

From page 7

The Road Board oversees collections of the MVUC and the use of the proceeds of the tax.

Budget Secretary Benjamin Diokno said since the MVUC is an off-budget item under the Road Board, it is exempt from Commission on Audit check.

The President said on Friday he agreed with senators' opinion that the time has come to abolish the Road Board which he called "a depository of money and corruption."

"I agree with the others and senators that it is time to abolish it and return that function to the DPWH. I side with the Senate," Duterte said in his speech during Philippine Air Force Change of Command ceremony at Villamor Air Base in Pasay City.

Speaker Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Majority Leader Rolando Andaya Jr. are both members of PDP but both have issued statements backing the retention of the body.

Mr. Duterte said the Senate has decided the right thing when it adopted on 12 September the House version of the bill seeking the board's abolition.

However, the House of Representatives, withdrew its approval of the bill that was passed during the term of former Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez.

The MVUC funds are supposed to be spent exclusively for road maintenance and improvement of road drainage, traffic lights and road safety devices installations and air pollution control.

"Ever since I assumed office, I've always been wary about this office because it has been the milking cow of people who are corrupt in government," Duterte said.

House blinks

Like a house of cards, the hardline stance of the House leadership to keep the Road Board intact collapsed after Mr. Duterte said he wanted it abolished.

Malacañang welcomed Andaya's remarks that the House of Representatives would heed President Rodrigo Duterte's call to abolish the Road Board.

"Cong. Andaya is finally in touch with reality contrary to his claim that Secretary (Benjamin) Diokno and I were out of touch with the President in the matter of the latter's position on the Road User's Tax and abolition of Road Board," presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said

in a statement.

"We are pleased to know that the House of Representatives has listened to the voice of the people who have long been outraged by the corruption surrounding the use of the said tax," he added.

Andaya is finally in touch with reality

The lawmaker earlier had claimed the President agreed to keep the Road Board during a meeting with Arroyo back in September. But in his speech Friday night, Mr. Duterte insisted that "it is now time to abolish" the agency that has been "the milking cow" of corrupt government officials.

The Chief Executive also stressed "the Executive department will side with the Philippine Senate and its interpretation of the law that the process has been completed."

"Let the President's call for a clean and responsive government to the needs of the governed be taken to heart by those who temporarily wield political power so that our country could commence to traverse the path righteousness and progress so long denied them by those they have entrusted with authority," the spokesman added.

Once its dissolution is completed, all functions of the Road Board such as road maintenance and improvement of road drainage, installation of traffic lights and road safety devices and air pollution control, shall be transferred to the DPWH.

Chamber to get guidance

In a statement, Andaya said the House will act based on the guidance of the President.

"The President has spoken. We heard his message to the House. We will act based on his guidance. As an institution, we will heed the President's call," Andaya said.

The majority floor leader

noted that since Duterte has made known his stand, the House can now focus on scrutinizing the budget, including the "parked pork and P75-billion Department of Budget and Management insertions."

But the lawmaker added: "If the President wants an abolition of the Road Board, let it be real abolition. No residues. No Three Road Kings."

"The proceeds need to be included as a line-item fund in the annual budget of the Department of Public Works and Highways in the General Appropriations Act," Andaya stressed.

"This way, the real and full funding level of the DPWH is reflected clearly, unlike today when MVUC spending is segregated and created as a non-national budget expenditure," he said.

Senate to wait

The Senate also backpedaled from its earlier pronouncement that it will submit its proposal to abolish the controversial Road Board and send the directly to Duterte with or without Arroyo's signature.

In a statement, Senate President Vicente Sotto III said the Senate is now willing to wait for Arroyo to sign the bill abolishing the Road Board, saying they have made the decision after being told about Andaya's latest statement that the House would heed President Duterte's call to abolish the board.

Let the President's call for a clean and responsive government to the needs of the governed be taken to heart.

"That's good news. It will avoid any further conflict," Sotto said. "We were ready to ask for the President's signature but now that the House of Representatives will support, then we will wait for the Speaker's signature," he added.

Under Arroyo's leadership, the House rescinded its approval of the bill.

Armas ng gov't, ibinebenta sa Maute?

Nagsasagawa na ngayon ng masusing imbestigasyon ang militar upang matukoy ang lawak ng operasyon ng mag-asawa ang gaa runner na umano'y nagsu-supply ng mga armas sa Maute group sa Mindanao.

Ayon kay Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Public Affairs chief, Col. Noel Delosato, ang nasansam na mataas na kalibre ng beril at mga bala sa mag-asawang sina Edgardo Medel at Rosamaria Medel ay natuklasang nagmula sa 7th Infantry Division (ID) ng

Philippine Army (PA) sa Fort Magsaysay sa Palayan, Nueva Ecija.

Inaresto ng mga awtoridad ang mag-asawa nang benzahan nila ang mga ito ng mga beril at bala, na nagkakahalaga ng P1.2 milyon, sa Valenzuela City, karnakalan.

Sa ulat, ang mga kahong pinaglagyan ng mga nasabing armas ay may markang "AFP, Government Property" at Philippine Army".

Ligio Nolasco at Fer Tahoy

Efforts underway for safe release of abducted troops

By MIKE L. CRISMONDO

SIBAGAT, Agusan del Sur - The local crisis committee here convened last Friday to work for the safe release of a Philippine Army soldier and a militiaman who were abducted by New People's Army (NPA) rebels somewhere in the forested mountain border of Agusan del Sur and Surigao del Sur recently.

The local crisis committee was also convened following the requests of the families of the victims for their immediate release.

"We are hoping that we can contact the hostage-takers any-

time today, to start the safe release of the hostages," said a member of the local crisis committee here, who requested anonymity as he is not authorized to issue any statement to media.

The source refused to give other details to the media so as not to jeopardize the negotiations.

Maj. Rodolfo S. Cordero Jr. Civil Military Operation officer of the 401st Infantry welcomed and hailed the initiative and efforts of the local crisis committee for their effort.

"We are only hoping that they (hostage-takers) will observe the human rights of their hostages," Cordero said.

Politics of obstruction

“
The
missing
piece in
Rodrigo's
agenda
for change
is the
Federalism
shift.”

The yellow Liberal Party (LP) has lost all credibility to Filipinos after the insensitive and incompetent administration of President Noynoy Aquino squandered opportunities for the nation in favor of his brand of vindictive politics.

Now, even foreign observers are seeing the LP's obstructionist and destructive agenda just to regain government control.

Key members of the LP were recently tagged as part of the "Red October" plot to oust President Rodrigo Duterte.

Intelligence reports said the LP bolted out of an alliance with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in the ouster effort after initial mobilizations bombed out, forcing the Reds to do it alone.

Eurasia Future analyst Adam Garrie who covers global geopolitics said the LP instead of advocating a more open economy, freer trade, political reforms, infrastructural megaprojects or improved public services, made its flagship policy "to overthrow the democratically elected President of the Philippines."

His article argued the LP's rabid opposition to Federalism is underpinned by its futile oust-Duterte campaign.

"The Liberals are totally opposed to constitutional reform (aka charter change) which would establish a Singapore-or-Malaysia-style parliamentary democracy in the Philippines. By contrast, those who support creating a parliamentary system in the Philippines tend to be supporters of Rodrigo Duterte," it added.

He noted that the powerful Aquino family who oversaw the drafting of the current 1987 Philippine Constitution "created a system that favors their interests and these from similar socio-economic backgrounds."

Garrie's review stated the "Aquinos were a powerful family of "hacenderos," a Spanish era term which in 21st

century nomenclature essentially means agricultural and land owning oligarchs."

Thus, he said the 1987 Constitution of former President Cory Aquino, Noyonoy's mother, "instituted limits to foreign direct investment and free trade which offer modern market competition against those with vested interests in maintaining a closed-door monopoly over the economic life of the people."

"By contrast, in a full parliamentary system, a party opposed to the closed economic model of the 1987 Constitution could have campaigned throughout the country on an ideas based manifesto for economic liberty, consumer rights, job creation and seeking substantial foreign investment to help modernize" the economy, he wrote.

“Key members of the LP were recently tagged as part of the ‘Red October’ plot.”

"The Liberals know that based on their ability to raise capital, to influence the corporate mainstream media, to court influence from powerful Western nations and their ability to try and hoodwink more gullible sectors of the population with a slick well-funded campaign, chances are that they have a far better chance of coming back to power under the current system than in a parliamentary system," he said.

The Liberals are in reality less concerned with removing Duterte than they are concerned with reversing all of his reforms after a would-be 2022 presidential election, he added.

The analysis can be extended further in that while supposed Congress allies of Rody outwardly states support to the Federalism crusade, they frequently use what amounts to alibis to frustrate it.

The key objectives of the shift in the system of government are the dispersal of wealth and the opening of the economy to crucial foreign investments that would, however, pose competition to the oligarchs.

Garric said "anything that takes away control from the central government risks putting power in the hands of those who have received nothing from and therefore owe nothing to a powerful clique of oligarchs."

For him, "presidential systems tend to favor rich socio-economic and political dynasties whose money is used to back a single individual rather than a more collective effort where multiple parliamentary candidates rally behind an ideas based manifesto. Similar reasons lie behind the Liberal opposition to Federalism."

Rody has proven his foresight time and again, particularly in the war on drugs and the independent foreign policy which are the cornerstones of his administration.

The missing piece in Rody's agenda for change is the Federalism shift that his yellow critics are opposing vigorously since achieving is equated to their political demise.

NPA family yields gov't firearms

**By Kathleen Mae
Balquorin**

Three members of a family, who are all confessed members of the New People's Army (NPA), have voluntarily surrendered to the

Davao City police and handed over government-issued firearms and ammunition.

Police identified the suspects as a certain Olegario, 52, his wife Lucena, 49, and son Jesriel, 27, all of Sitio Banarao, Barangay

Talandang, Tugbok District, Davao City.

This developed as the local police launched an investigation to determine how the suspects managed to possess firearms and ammunition with markings "Government Arsenal," indicating they were issued to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

Chief Supt. Marcelo Morales, director of Police Regional Office-11, confirmed that the three were active members of the NPA under Pulang Bagani Command 1, operating in the boundaries of Davao City, Bakidnon and Davao del Norte.

The surrendered firearms and ammunition consisted of a homemade Ingram sub-machine gun, a 9-mm. pistol, eight pieces of M203 and two fragmentation grenades.

The ammunition, which bear government markings and lot number, will now be the subject of an investigation by a task force which Morales said he would create to trace the source and how they landed in the hands of the NPA.

Morales said the family will

undergo further debriefing for other vital information, especially on their involvement in NPA activities in Davao.

The surrendered firearms and ammunition consisted of a homemade Ingram sub-machine gun, one 9 mm. pistol, eight pieces of M203 and two fragmentation grenades.

Davao City police chief Senior Supt. Alexander Tagun said the couple used to be land tenants but left after the landowner accused them of qualified theft and filed a case against them.

The couple's son, Jesriel, admitted he was one of those who burned the Lapanday plant last year. Lapanday lost billions of pesos in that incident.

Jesriel also has information on the activities of other NPA members who were involved in various attacks a few months ago.

To recall, a couple from Valenzuela was arrested by the police earlier this month after a cache of firearms and ammunitions also bearing AFP markings were recovered from them.

Headline

Bully Reds waylay convoy

By Perseus Echaminada

Despite a claimed unilateral ceasefire, communist New People's Army (NPA) guerrillas ambushed an Army advance team on its way to secure Christmas gift giving and medical mission in the Higaonon tribal

village of Dumalaguin in Impasugong, Bukidnon last Thursday.

Reports said at least three soldiers from the 8th Infantry Battalion were wounded in the attack in Sitio San Isidro in Barangay Calabugao a few kilometers from an Army detachment

Turn to page 6

If the management of your respective families could turn out well, then that can radiate to the community, to barangays and even to towns and local governments

From page 1

Despite the ambush, local government officials led by Mayor Anthony Uy reached the Dumalaguin tribal village and conducted dental and medical mission without any untoward incident.

During the medical mission, Christmas gift packages were distributed to residents of the area.

Report said the soldiers sustained injuries but were declared by Army doctors on stable condition.

The military and the local government unit (LGU) of Impasugong were set to conduct free dental and medical check-up, health assistance and gift giving.

The NPA fighters responsible for the ambush were believed members of the Sub-Regional Committee (SRC)-1, North Central Mindanao Regional Command that operates in Bukidnon, Agusan and Misamis Oriental.

Prior to the ambush, the military said four members of the NPA command had surrendered to the 8IB in Barangay Poblacion, Impasugong town, Wednesday.

The four were identified as alias Olayan, 52; alias Jeca, 20; alias Balogbog, 23 and his wife alias Rama, 21.

The rebels surrendered their guns which included a two-caliber 9 millimeter (mm) submachine gun, caliber 357 revolver and an M79 grenade launcher.

Spend holidays home

The commander of the Philippine Army's 2nd Infantry "Jungle Fighter" Division (2ID) at Camp Capampin in Tanay, Rizal has appealed to members of the NPA to lay down their arms and come home to celebrate Christmas and the New Year with their families and loved ones in peace, love and joy which they can extend for a lifetime by returning to their normal lives.

Maj. Gen. Rhoderick Parayno, commander of the Army's 2ID, made the appeal to the communist insurgents in his speech in a fellowship gathering at the camp's Division Training School early Thursday.

"We are banking on the help of our various stakeholders, local government chief executives and the media, especially this Christmas season to help us convince our brothers who have lost their way to just come back to the fold of the law. Be productive and responsible citizens," Parayno said.

The 2ID commanding general

encouraged the NPA to come home during the yuletide season so they could feel how one could really enjoy living in a democratic country where one is free and productive and that one does not have to fear for anything violent that could happen to him.

Be peaceful, productive

"It's a different feeling to be back home and be around with the family and hug your children. If you could feel that way, you will realize the need to live in peace and be productive," Parayno said.

He added the return of fellow Filipinos who have lost the cause for their armed struggle against the government could instead help their respective communities at the local level, help the government by starting to first be back in the mainstream and concentrate on their families.

"If the management of your respective families could turn out well, then that can radiate to the community, to barangays and even to towns and local governments," the 21D commander added.

He said the government, along with the LGU and various government agencies and the Enhanced Comprehensive Livelihood Integration Program (E-CLIP), stands ready and is hopeful to assist the rebel returnees.

Terror-free communities

He said the island provinces of Marinduque and Romblon have been declared as "insurgency-free" with Batangas province coming next by this month as processes have been undertaken for the rebels' continuing surrenders in recent months.

Soldiers sustained injuries but were declared by Army doctors on stable condition.

"In Mindoro alone, we had recorded a total of 80 surrenders just for the two months in November and December. And of this 80, who are mostly members of the 'Militia ng Bayan' (people's militia) who conduct armed operations," Parayno said.

Parayno added armed insurgents no longer have a strong presence in the urban centers due to the combined military and police efforts in cooperation with local officials forcing the NPA comrades to hide in the highlands.

He said NPA members surrendered in Umiray as it is the most accessible area which proves the armed insurgency has declined.

"What is important here is that encounters since September were all the results of information from civilian population. If the reports came from communities, we immediately verify then act on the report," the 21D commander said.

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4 NPA, sumuko

CAMP BANDASI, Butuan City - Apat pang kaanib ng New People's Army (NPA) ang sumu-render sa pamahalaan sa Bukidnon, kamakailan.

Ito ang inihayag ni Lt. Col. Ronald Ilana, commanding officer ng 8th Infantry Battalion (8th IB) ng Philippine Army (PA).

Hindi na binanggit ni Ilana ang pagkakakilanlan ang apat na komunistang rebelde para na rin sa kanilang seguridad.

Ang mga ito aniya ay kasapi ng Sub-Regional Committee 1 (SRC 1) ng Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)-NPA North Central Mindanao Command na nag-o-operate sa Bukidnon.

Aniya isinukong ang apat na dalawang caliber 9mm submachinegun, isang 387 caliber revolver, isang M79 Grenade launcher at iba't ibang uri ng bala.

Nitong nakatapos na linggo, aabot sa 50 na rebelde sa nasabi ring talawigan ang nagbalik-hood sa pamahalaan at agad silang binigyan ng ayuda ng gobyerno para sa kanilang pagbabagong-buhay.



Int'l observers to monitor Bangsamoro plebiscite

By SHEILA CRISOSTOMO

International observers will monitor the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), according to the Commission on Elections.

Comelec spokesman James Jimenez said the poll body accredited more than 20 foreign observers from the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan and the United States.

Jimenez said international observation missions boost the credibility of the electoral exercise being monitored.

"Having third-party witnesses to the event... gives an assurance that the world has a clear view into what's going on... It increases the comfort level of people outside the elections," Jimenez said.

He said the reports of observers are "very valuable" feedback for the poll body.

Jimenez said observers are "very knowledgeable"

in democratic process and interested in ensuring that the fundamental rights of voters are protected.

However, Jimenez said international observers should not interfere in the process.

"Whether or not they agree with what they see, whether or not they feel that there is something wrong with the process as it is ongoing ... The point is they can watch but they cannot interfere," he said.

The plebiscite will be conducted on Jan. 21 in areas that will comprise the proposed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). These are in Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi; 39 barangays in North Cotabato, six towns in Lanao del Norte and the cities of Cotabato in Maguindanao and Isabela in Basilan.

On Feb. 6, the plebiscite will be held in areas contiguous to the BARMM.

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OPAPP: Choose peace in solving political disputes

By JOSE RODEL CLAPANO

Choose peace in trying to solve political disputes in the country.

Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Carlito Galvez Jr. issued the statement yesterday, saying he is determined to solve political disputes with his experience in armed conflicts.

The former Armed Forces chief, who officially assumed as the new Presidential Adviser on the Peace

Process on Dec. 20, said seeing a man dying is quite an experience.

"Have you seen the tears of a dying man? I did many times... It is very painful. We cannot go back to war anymore," Galvez said during the handover rites at the main office of the Office of Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP).

Galvez said some critics "have pointed out that I come from an institution that manufactures war machines."

"But let me tell you, having been in the military for decades made me see the ugly head of armed conflict. In my early days in the military service, I was wounded in a battle

somewhere in the Davao area. That experience has made me choose the path of peace," Galvez said.

In his farewell speech, former peace adviser Jesus Dureza said he has "great confidence" that he is handing over the reins of OPAPP to Galvez who he described as "someone I have known... for a long time."

"There is no other person who can deal with peace than a person who faces war daily in his life as a military person," Dureza said.

Galvez, who assumed as the 11th Presidential Peace Adviser is not the first retired general to lead OPAPP.

The first military man to assume the position of peace adviser was

General Manuel Yan, who later became an ambassador.

It was under Yan that the final peace agreement between the government and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was signed.

Other military men who had served as presidential peace adviser were Gen. Eduardo Ermita and Gen. Hermogenes Esperon Jr.

Gen. Avelino Razon, a former chief of police, was also named peace adviser.

Other former top military men also served in the government peace panels in the peace negotiations.

Critical crossroad

Galvez thanked President Duterte for

the trust and confidence given to him, saying he will do his best to be a good adviser as the entire peace process in the country is "at the critical crossroad."

"We have the plebiscite in Mindanao to win. We have also President Duterte's EO 70 to accomplish. And we have other equally important peace tables that we need to continue to engage with," Galvez said.

Executive Order 70, which Duterte signed on Dec. 4, directs the adoption of a national peace framework and institutionalizing the whole-of-nation approach to attain "inclusive and sustainable peace" in the country to address the root causes of the armed conflict.

- With Edith Regalado

BOC unloads smuggled rice at Zamboanga port

By NENEVE LACSON

ZAMBOANGA CITY - The Bureau of Customs (BOC) started unloading at the local port here the 58,000 bags of smuggled rice recently seized by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) from a cargo ship off the coast of Bangunai, Sulu.

BOC Zamboanga City district collector Segundo Barte Jr on Saturday said the imported rice is worth an estimated P45 million.

Barte also revealed that his office implemented stricter se-

curity measures to ensure that the rice will be stored in a government warehouse and not be pilfered.

"My office has also adopted stricter measures in transporting the seized imported rice to our bodega to ensure that not a sack will be lost while in transit to our warehouse," he said.

He said that every cargo truck is escorted by elements of the PCG, soldiers from Task Force Zamboanga and BOC personnel to ensure that the sacks of rice will reach its destination intact.

25 FOREIGN OBSERVERS TO WITNESS BOL PLEBISCITE

AT LEAST 25 international observers are going to witness the plebiscite for the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law on Jan. 21 and Feb. 6 next year, the Commission on Elections said.

Comelec spokesperson James Jimenez said the foreign observers were from the European Union, Australia, Japan, Canada, and the US.

He noted that allowing international observers to monitor the plebiscite would increase the credibility of the electoral process they would be witnessing.

"Having third-party witnesses to the event basically assures that the world has a clear view into (sic) what's going on in the ground level. In that sense, it increases the comfort level of people outside the elections as to what's going on with the elections," he said in a media interview.

"Second, observers do give reports to the election management body which means these reports act as very valuable feedback that will allow the election management body to fine-tune its procedures, to weed out procedures that don't work and to adopt good practices that do," he said.

"Finally, when we talk about international observers, of course we're talking about people who are very knowledgeable, normally in the democratic process. And people who are very interested in ensuring that fundamental rights of people who are voting are protected and that's a very important part of any election, especially in a plebiscite," Jimenez said.

The Comelec official reminded the visitors about some restrictions to be implemented.

He said: "Very few. Primarily we only ask them to act professionally at all times, to identify themselves to the election authorities on the ground. And that they give copies of their reports.

"They have access to all parts of the process, to the people involved in the process. For instance, if the Philippine National Police were to hold a command conference on the ground, they, theoretically, can ask to sit in and watch the proceedings.

"However, it is expected that international observers will not interfere in the process. Whether or not they agree with what they see, whether or not they feel that there is something wrong with the process as it is ongoing.

"It is expected by international convention that they will not interfere in the process. The point is *manawad tayo, hindi yung makikialam tayo* (The point is let us observe, not intervene)."

As for their security, Jimenez said they were coordinating with proper authorities.

"We are coordinating with the PNP and Armed Forces of the Philippines. They themselves have security liaisons. That is a very serious, real concern and that's why we're not sparing any effort in terms of putting the two of them together. These observer missions know that it is their primary responsibility to keep their observers safe. We will assist in every way possible," he said. PNA A-11

SUSPECTED ASG FALLS IN TONDO

A SUSPECTED member of the Abu Sayyaf has been arrested in Tondo, National Capital Region Police Office Director Guillermo Eleazar said on Saturday.

Eleazar identified the suspect as Sudais Asmad, 25, a native of Landang, Zamboanga del Sur who is residing at the Baseco Compound in Tondo, Manila.

Asmad, allegedly a follower of Abu Sayyaf Group leader Furuji Indama, was reportedly in Manila to receive financial support from sympathizers, and other unknown missions.

He was arrested for kidnapping and serious illegal detention charges, Eleazar said.

Operatives of NCRPO's Regional Special Operations Unit served the warrant of arrest against the suspect.

Police recovered a pistol, a magazine loaded with

four live ammunition, and a chamber loaded with one live ammunition during the operation.

Eleazar said Asmad was part of the Abu Sayyaf group that kidnapped 15 employees of the Golden Harvest Plantation in Lantawan, Basilan from June to October 2001.

One of the victims identified Asmad as one of the kidnapers and provided an affidavit on his involvement in the crime.

Asmad is also said to be a liaison and escort/guide of Balik Islam that was supposed to augment the local terrorist group under Isnilon Hapilon during the Marawi siege in May 2017.

The suspect is under the custody of the PSOU in Camp Bagong Diwa.

In addition to the kidnapping charges, Asmad will also face charges for violating the Comprehensive Firearms and Ammunition Regulation Act. **PNA**

Campaign for BOL in full swing in Lanao

BY MASIDING N. YAHYA

ILIGAN CITY: Even as the Dimaporo clan is opposed to the division of Lanao del Norte, the campaign on the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) by the people of the province is now in full swing.

Maigo town Mayor Rafael Rizalda is campaigning for "Yes" in the BOL plebiscite on Jan. 21, 2019.

He said the people of the towns of Tagoloan, Baloi, Pantar, Munai, Tangkal and Nunungan had expressed in two past plebiscites

their determination to join the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

Rizalda said he respected the people of the six municipalities' right to self-determination, and they should be supported.

He added that many lives and properties were lost in the struggle of the Moros to self-determination.

"Now that a peace formula has been reached, it deserves the full support of all," Rizalda said.

Meanwhile, Rep. Mohammad Khalid Dimaporo of the Firat district of Lanao del Norte is campaigning for "No" to inclusion in the forthcoming plebiscite.

Big billboards showing the lawmaker's photos are displayed all over the province stating that while he supported the BOL he is against the division of Lanao del Norte.

He is campaigning against the inclusion of its six municipalities to the Bangsamoro Region.

He stressed that peace can only be achieved through good governance.

The Dimaporo clan has been the longest ruling political family in Lanao del Norte, starting from the late Ali Dimaporo, followed by his son Abdullah and grandson Khalid.

Imelda Dimaporo, wife of second district lawmaker Abdullah, and mother of Khalid, is the incumbent governor of Lanao del Norte.

Will Trump hold firm on Syrian pullout?

PENNSYLVANIA: "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there," wrote President Donald Trump, as he ordered the withdrawal of all US forces from Syria, stunning the US foreign policy establishment.

Trump overruled his secretaries of state and defense and jolted this city and capitals across NATO Europe and the Middle East.

Yet, Trump is doing exactly what he promised to do in his campaign. And what his decision seems to say is this:

We are extricating America from the forever war of the Middle East so foolishly begun by previous Presidents. We are coming home. The rulers and peoples of this region are going to have to find their own way and fight their own wars. We are not so powerful that we can fight their wars while we also confront Iran and North Korea and face new Cold Wars with Russia and China.

As for the terrorists of ISIS, says Trump, they are defeated.



**CREATORS SYNDICATE
PATRICK J. BUCHANAN**

Yet, despite the heavy casualties and lost battles ISIS has suffered, the collapse of the caliphate, expulsion from its Syrian capital Raqqa and Iraqi capital Mosul, and from almost all territories it controlled in both countries, ISIS is not dead. It lives on in thousands of true believers hidden in those countries. And, like al-Qaida, it has followers across the Middle East and inspires haters of the West living in the West.

The US pullout from Syria is being called a victory for Vladimir Putin. "Russia, Iran, Assad... are ecstatic!" wails Sen. Lindsey Graham.

Graham is echoed by Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse who called the withdrawal a "retreat" and charged that Trump's generals "believe the high-fiving winners today are Iran, ISIS and Hezbollah."

But ISIS is a Sunni terrorist organization. And, as such, it detests the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad, and Hezbollah and Iran, both of which are hated by ISIS as Shiite heretics.

"Russia, Iran, Syria... are not happy about the US leaving," Trump tweeted, "despite what the Fake News says, because now they will have to fight ISIS and others, who they hate, without us."

If Putin, victorious in the Syrian civil war, wishes to fight al-Qaida and ISIS, the last major enemies of Assad in Syria, why not let him?

The real losers?

Certainly the Kurds, who lost their American ally. Any dream they had of greater autonomy inside Syria, or an independent state, is not going to be realized. But then, that was never really in the cards.

Forced to choose between Turkey, with 80 million people and the second-largest army in NATO, which sits astride the Dardanelles

and Bosphorus entrance to the Black Sea, and the stateless Kurds with their Syrian Democratic Forces, or YPG, Trump chose Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

And Erdogan regards the YPG as kinfolk and comrades of the Kurdish terrorist PKK in Turkey. A week ago, he threatened to attack the Kurds in northern Syria, though US troops are embedded alongside them.

What kind of deal did Trump strike with Erdogan?

Turkey will purchase the US Patriot anti-aircraft and missile defense system for \$3.5 billion, and probably forego the Russian S-400.

Trump also told Erdogan, we "would take a look at" extraditing Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdogan says instigated the 2016 coup attempt that was to end with his assassination.

National Security Adviser John Bolton, who said US troops would remain in Syria until all Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias have been ex-

pelled, appears not to have been speaking for his President.

And if the Israelis were relying on US forces in Syria to intercept any Iranian weapons shipments headed to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Damascus, then the Israelis are going to have to make other arrangements.

The war party project, to bring about regime change in Tehran through either severe sanctions leading to insurrection or a US-Iranian clash in the Gulf, will suffer a severe setback with the US pullout from Syria.

However, given the strength of the opposition to a US withdrawal — Israel, Saudi Arabia, the GOP foreign policy establishment in Congress and the think tanks, liberal interventionists in the Beltway press, Trump's own national security team of advisers — the battle to overturn Trump's decision has probably only just begun.

From FDR's abandonment of 100 million East Europeans to Stalin at Yalta in 1945, to the

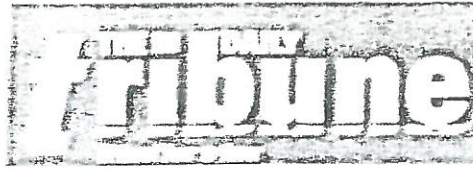
abandonment of our Nationalist Chinese allies to Mao in 1949, and of our South Vietnamese allies in 1975, America has often been forced into retreats leading to the deaths of allies. Sasse says Trump is risking the same outcome: "A lot of American allies will be slaughtered if this retreat is implemented."

But is that true?

Trump's decision to pull out of Syria at least has assured us of a national debate on what it will mean to America to extricate our country from these Mideast wars, the kind of debate we have not had in the 15 years since we were first deceived into invading Iraq.

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Patrick J. Buchanan is the author of "Nixon's White House Wars: The Battles That Made and Broke a Presidency and Divided America Forever." To find out more about Patrick Buchanan and read features by other Creators writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators website at www.creators.com.



Murad okays Bangsamoro biz model

Stressing that the continuing interest of investors and other stakeholders in Mindanao could eventually help lead their people out of poverty, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim on Friday approved the proposed "inclusive business model" concept that was proposed during the launching of Business Sustainability Framework in the Bangsamoro (BSFB) in Cotabato City.

In his message read by Edward Guerra, co-chair of the government and MILF joint normalization committee, Ebrahim said "the inclusive business model is the one best suited for the region where poverty incidence is 48 percent, the highest in the country."

The BSFB was crafted to increase investments that would hasten the development and peaceful integration of Muslim Mindanao into the national economy through the so-called Bridge project that is funded by the Australian government.

"This BSFB launch could not have come at a more appropriate time as we prepare for a new political arrangement with the national government," Murad said.

He pointed out that the

continuing engagement of the business sector and stakeholders in the region "is a testament of their confidence in our ability to transition smoothly into what we envision is a better future with a more stable policy environment for the business sector."

This BSFB launch could not have come at a more appropriate time as we prepare for a new political arrangement with the national government.

In a separate statement, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Regional Board of Investments (RBoI) said the inclusive business model, "while attaining for profit, also benefits the poor."

"It attends to the higher calling of benefiting low-income communities, not through charitable acts but through the inclusion of the poor in the business operations providing them livelihood that will build a dignified society," the agency said.

The BSFB launch was led by the RBoI-ARMM, together with the Philippine Business for Social Progress and Hineleban Foundation Inc. **JOC**

ARTICLE

Congress cannot abolish ARMM

As of this writing, there are two separate petitions filed in the Supreme Court which assail the constitutionality of Republic Act (RA) 11054 or the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). The petitioners are the provincial governor of Sulu and the Philippine Constitution Association (Phiconsa).



THE SCRUTINIZER
Victor Avacilla

To recall, the BOL is a revised version of the controversial Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) which was an attempt by President Benigno Aquino III to establish a Moro sub-state in Mindanao. Fortunately, the BBL was not acted upon by the Senate due to its many objectionable provisions pointed out by experts in constitutional law.

If approved in a plebiscite to be held in Mindanao early next year, the BOL will create the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BAR) which will replace the existing Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The BAR will have a parliamentary government, unlike the presidential system in the country. A prime minister will head the BAR, with powers almost akin to the President of the Philippines.

The petitioners contend, among other arguments, that Congress cannot abolish the ARMM and replace it with the BAR because the 1987 Constitution allows only

two autonomous regions and they are already operating. For them, the Constitution must be amended first to allow Congress to replace the ARMM.

Actually, the issue raised by the petitioners can be simplified. Does Congress have the power to enact legislation abolishing the existing ARMM and replacing it with the BAR? May the BAR government be a parliamentary one?

Section 15, Article X of the Constitution allows the establishment of two autonomous regions — in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras — which shall have characteristics within the framework of the Constitution.

There is Section 18 of Article X which requires Congress to enact an organic act for each autonomous region. It also states that the creation of the autonomous region shall take effect if approved in a plebiscite.

Under Section 19, the power to enact the organic acts for the two autonomous regions is vested in "the first Congress elected under this Constitution."

The Phiconsa cites the proceedings of the 1986 Constitutional Commission which drafted the 1987 Constitution which indicate that two commissioners, Fr. Joaquin Bernas, S.J. and

Elas Ople, clarified during the deliberations of the commission that a constitutional amendment is the only way to create a new and distinct autonomous region.

From a holistic perspective, therefore, it looks like the BOL suffers from constitutional infirmity.

Section 19 vests the power to enact the organic acts for the two autonomous regions in the first Congress, that is, the one which operated from 1987 up to 1992. The present Congress is certainly not the first Congress.

Doesn't Congress have the power to amend the organic act of the ARMM by enacting a law replacing the latter with the BAR?

“ If approved in a plebiscite, the BOL will create the BAR which will replace the existing ARMM.”

That may seem so, but the organic act of the ARMM is no ordinary piece of legislation because the said organic act was approved in a plebiscite. Congress cannot undo what the Filipino voters decided by way of the plebiscite, unless Congress disregards the concept of popular sovereignty recited in Section 1, Article II of the current charter.

The 1987 Constitution was approved by the sovereign Filipino people in a plebiscite. Why is it that Congress can propose amendments to the 1987 Constitution, notwithstanding its approval in a plebiscite?

For one, Congress cannot amend the Constitution. It can only propose amendments, for approval in a plebiscite and only because Article XVII of the Constitution explicitly allows amendments in accordance with a strict procedure recited likewise in Article XVII.

In contra-distinction, Article X of the 1987 Constitution has no provision allowing Congress to change a statute that has been approved in a plebiscite by the sovereign Filipino voters. This is probably the reason why Commissioners Bernas and Ople clarified during the deliberations of the 1986 Constitutional Commission that a constitutional amendment is the only way to create a new and distinct autonomous region, either in Muslim Mindanao or in the Cordilleras.

Congress, therefore, cannot abolish the ARMM and replace it with the BAR by means of RA 11054.

Finally, the parliamentary government to be installed in the BAR runs afoul of Section 15, Article X of the Constitution which mandates that the government system in the autonomous region shall have characteristics within the framework of the 1987 Constitution. The government operating under the 1987 Constitution is a presidential system, not a parliamentary one. On this score as well, the BOL is constitutionally flawed.

'Abu Sayyaf' dinakma sa Binondo

Isang hindiinalang miyembro ng Mindanao-based terror group na Abu Sayyaf (ASG) ang inaresto ng mga awtoridad sa Binondo, Maynila, isinawalat ng National Capital Region Police Office (NCRPO) kahapon.

Kinilala ni NCRPO Director Guillermo Eleazar ang suspek na si Sudan Asmad, alias Sen. Abu Nas, Suhad, at Jul, 25, na miyembro umano ng ASG na pinamamantalan sa Faruq Indarna sa ilalim ng Dawlah Islamiyah.

Tubong Landang, Zamboanga del Sur, somab ni Eleazar na si Asmad ay nagtatrabaho bilang delivery boy at pansamantalang tumatayo sa Baseco Compound, Block 9, sa Tondo, Maynila.

Sa pagtatipon ng Regional Special

Operations Unit (RSOU) ng NCRPO at Regional Intelligence Division (RID) at sa pakikipagkaisangin ng Philippine National Police-Intelligence Group (PNP-IG), naaresto si Asmad sa kaharain ng Elcano Street, Barangay 271, Binondo, Maynila nitong Disyembre 20, dakong 10:15 ng gabi.

Ayon kay Eleazar, si Asmad ay may warrant of arrest, na may petsang Enero 26, 2008, na inisyu ni Hon. Leofay Principe, presiding judge ng Regional Trial Court (RTC) Branch 1, 9th Judicial Region sa Isabela, Basilan, para sa kidnapping at serious illegal detention.

Inaangkinay si Asmad sa pagtatukod sa 15 empleyado ng Golden Harvest

Plantation sa Bgy. Tairan, Lantawan, Basilan noong Hulyo 11, 2008.

Strabir ni Eleazar na isa sa 15 dinakot ay positibong kinilala ang pagkakasangkot ni Asmad sa krimen.

Aniya, nakatanggap sila ng impormasyon na si Asmad ay namatagan sa Maynila kaya agad niyang ipinag-utos na magsagawa ng surveillance laban dito.

Matatagpuanay sa nalantiran ng operatibo si Asmad at nakapaghatin ng warrant laban sa kanya.

Kinapkapap si Asmad at kinuha ang isang .45 caliber pistol, na katagdo ng limang bala at isang chamber, na may isang bala.

Martin A. Sadongdong

ASG nabbed in Binondo

By MARTIN A. SADONGDONG

A suspected member of the Abu Sayyaf Group has been arrested by joint police forces in Binondo, Manila, the National Capital Region Police Office revealed yesterday.

NCRPO chief Director Guillermo Eleazar identified the suspect as Sudais Asmad, alias "Sen," "Abu Nas," "Suhud," and "Jul," 25.

Asmad is allegedly a member of the ASG led by Furuji Indama under the umbrella group of the Dawlah Islamiyah.

A native of Landang, Zamboanga del Sur, Eleazar said Asmad works as a delivery boy and was temporarily residing in Baseco Com-

pound, Block 9, Tondo, Manila.

Asmad was nabbed on Elcano St., Barangay 271, around 10:05 p.m. last Dec. 20 by operatives the NCRPO Regional Special Operations Unit and Regional Intelligence Division in coordination with the Philippine National Police-Intelligence Group.

According to Eleazar, Asmad was the subject of a warrant of arrest dated Jan. 28, 2008 issued by Judge Leo Jay Principe, presiding judge of the Regional Trial Court Branch 1, 9th Judicial Region, in Isabela, Basilan for kidnapping and serious illegal detention.

Asmad was tagged in the kidnapping of 15 employees of Golden Harvest Plantation in Barangay

Takran, Lantawan, Basilan on June 11, 2001. Eleazar said one of the 15 kidnap victims positively identified and executed an affidavit detailing Asmad's participation in the crime.

Eleazar said they received an information that Asmad has been spotted in Manila so he immediately ordered the operatives to conduct a surveillance against him.

The operatives finally tracked Asmad after some time and they successfully served the warrant against him.

Police frisked Asmad and said they found in his possession a caliber .45 pistol loaded with four live ammunition and a chamber loaded with one bullet.

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Marawi Golf Course

66 **Marawi vis-a-vis other Moro towns is culturally conservative.**

Yes Virginia, there's a golf course in Marawi. But it's not your typical swanky golf course with lush well-manicured fairways and bent grass greens you see on TV and glossy magazines. It's much less than that. But the Scots invented golf not for anything else but for fun and locals always have fun playing the course.

Sometime in 1993 when I was a member of Congress, then Speaker Jose de Venecia invited me to join him in an official visit to Jakarta on the occasion of the Independence Day of Indonesia. While there, he was invited to play golf and asked me if I know how to play. I was then a low handicapper and in the prime of my game. I beamed as I said to myself: "Joe, you are like throwing a fish in the water." After the game where I scored good he asked me where I learned to play golf.

The Mindanao State University sits on a hilltop with sprawling campus overlooking the city proper and the scenic Lake Lanao. The cool winter-like weather most of the year is the reason why Marawi, an idyllic tour destination before the war, is known as the Summer Capital of the South. Part of the university campus was converted into a rough 9-hole golf course (18-hole by cleverly moving the tee mounds) with indigenous "carabao grass" trimmed as fairways and local bermuda grass as greens. It was originally conceived to lend beauty to the academe and as an incentive to faculty members recruited from other parts of the country.



SOUTHERN VOICES
Macabangkit B. Lanto

Its upkeep is part of the University maintenance program. In one of the academe's almanacs, there is a picture showing then President Marcos hitting ceremonial tee off when he visited Marawi circa 1960.

Marawi vis-a-vis other Moro towns is culturally conservative. Maranaws are super religious. Then as now, there are no bars, decent restaurant (except at the Marawi Resort Hotel), cinema houses and sale of alcohol is banned. Our main source of entertainment, other than TV and radio and outlet after a day work is playing tennis and golf.

66 **Golf means fellowship... But the greatest thing in golf is friendship.**

You can count by fingers who play golf at that time. But recently quite a number has picked up the game which led to the formation of the Kampilan Golf Club, now headed by lawyer Mino Macalandap,

also IBP-Lanao Sur prexy. The club, founded by Rep. Simeon Datumanong, now deceased; Moro activists Sultan Ali Mindalano and Rotary Club Governor Concon Domago schedules tournaments among Moros and non-Moros in different Metro Manila golf courses and in cities of Iligan, Cagayan de Oro and Tagaytay. In the tournament in Davao City the number of participants shot up to 80 and still counting. On 26 December a year-end tourney was

sponsored by Rep. Jun Papandayan and quite an impressive number participated.

The club has likewise become a forum for exchanges of ideas on issues affecting Moros. The Marawi siege and its snail-paced rehabilitation occupy mostly the topic of discussion and lately the third extension of martial law.

The club members thought that in their own small way they could help build bridges of friendship and promote understanding not only among Moros but more importantly with non-Moro golfers in the shared march towards peace. They have sowed strong fraternal ties with Christian golfers in Iligan and Metro Manila who are now active members of Kampilan. It is a touching scene straight from storybook seeing Moros and Christians in fraternal competition and bantering in fairways and during socials.

In their own unheralded way, they hope to evangelize the evils of extreme Islamism; that there is life after the Marawi siege, and that Islam as a peaceful religion (Islam being derived from the word "salam" meaning peace) promotes the culture of understanding and cohesion with other "people of the book" as the Holy Koran describes non-Muslims.

It is a baby step towards peace. This could be an antidote against the spread of Whabbi-Salafists' extremism by indulging in addictive golf, shooting pars and birdies on the fairways instead of shooting people and throwing bombs.

As the great golfer Boby Jones say: "Golf means fellowship... But the greatest thing in golf is friendship."

To my readers: Happy holidays!

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