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10 May 2018

Thursday

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INQUIRY

A1

GOV'T, REDS MOVE CLOSER TO CEASEFIRE

STORY BY TONY S. BERGONIA

Negotiators seeking to end the communist insurgency have revived a year-old provisional ceasefire agreement that does not compel rebels to surrender their arms but requires them to end their tax collection.

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FROM A1

By Tony S. Bergonia
@Team_Inquirer

Government and communist rebel negotiators are on the verge of resuming formal peace talks after the two sides adopted an interim truce agreement that stopped short of requiring insurgents to lay down their arms.

The rebels, however, must end or suspend their collection of "revolutionary tax."

The provisional agreement, according to Inquirer sources, was based on a broad outline of a bilateral ceasefire that the negotiating panels of the government and National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) had agreed upon as early as last year.

The two-page document was signed on April 5, 2017, at The Hague by Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III, head of the government panel, and its members—Hernani Braganza, Rene Sarmiento, Angela Trinidad and Antonio Arellano. Fidel Agcaoli, the rebel pan-

el chair, Julieta de Lima, Coni Ledesma, Asterio Palima and Benito Tiamzon signed for the NDFP, the umbrella group of local communist organizations.

Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founding chair Jose Maria Sison, the NDFP's chief political consultant, and Presidential Peace Adviser Jesus Dureza also signed the document.

One of the sources said the agreement had been set aside following President Duterte's decision to cancel the talks last year but it was now being used as a "working guide" by the negotiators and served as the basis for the interim deal.

The agreement requires the ceasefire committees of both sides to meet separately to finalize guidelines for the truce to hold.

Revolutionary tax

The source said one of the guidelines would cover what the rebels call "revolutionary tax."

The New People's Army, the CPP's armed wing, collects taxes from businessmen and politicians in areas where they oper-

ate to raise funds for operations, food, supplies and aid to sympathetic communities or to indemnify victims of crossfires.

ment fund will be used," the source stressed, although Mr. Duterte earlier said he was willing to finance food supplies for the rebels and the communities they influenced.

"Donor countries" would be allowed to provide funding, but only for the noncombat needs of the rebels, the source said.

No country has yet been identified as a potential fund source, he added.

Just how much would be needed for the noncombat needs of the rebels for the duration of the talks was uncertain.

The military, quoted in a December 2017 report by the Inquirer, estimated that the NPA collects up to P460 million a year in revolutionary taxes in Southern Mindanao alone.

'Buffer zones'

Another Inquirer source said that under a formal ceasefire deal rebels and soldiers would be restricted to their camps or positions, which would be called "buffer zones."

The rebels also cannot launch operations to enforce taxation, according to the source.



RESURRECTED AGREEMENT In this April 5, 2017 photo, government and National Democratic Front of the Philippines negotiators shake hands on a joint ceasefire agreement they have recently revived to restart the stalled peace talks.

ate to raise funds for operations, food, supplies and aid to sympathetic communities or to indemnify victims of crossfires.

The military calls the rebel taxation plain extortion.

One source involved in the ongoing back-channel talks in the Netherlands said an alternative that could convince the NPA to cease its tax collection was to replace the money the

rebels collect with funds from other sources.

President Duterte has said the rebels must stop collecting revolutionary taxes as a gesture of sincerity in the negotiations to peacefully end the nearly half-century Maoist insurgency.

The source said countries that supported the peace process could provide the funds.

"No [Philippine] govern-

Suspending or ending rebel taxation would be crucial to meeting one of Mr. Duterte's conditions for resuming negotiations—a cessation of hostilities.

Both sides were also listing down what would be considered hostile acts during the implementation of the formal ceasefire, the sources said.

Surrender of firearms

Government negotiators were trying to work around a key NDFP condition in the talks—that the rebels would not be required to surrender their weapons until a permanent peace deal had already been signed.

Braganza, who had been involved in the talks under Presidents Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III, said in an interview last year that he understood the rebel sentiment.

"We should not offer them terms of surrender," said Braganza, a former youth activist during martial law.

"We are bringing to the table hope that we could work together to lift the people out of poverty, change the country," Braganza said. INQ

Rody to DOT chief: Don't be corrupt

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

After accepting her surprise appointment as tourism secretary on Tuesday, Bernadette Romulo-Puyat said her first instruction from President Duterte was: "Just don't be corrupt."

"My only instruction from the President when he offered it and then I accepted - he said, 'congratulations! All I want is no corruption. Don't steal' he told me. And I said, 'yes, of course,'" Puyat said yesterday in an interview.

With her at the helm of the Department of Tourism (DOT), Puyat said she would likely prioritize farm and culinary tourism.

"We've been working with (the DOT) with regard to farm tourism. That's been their main project with the DA (Department of Agriculture). So might as well continue it," she said. "I will continue the farm tourism and culinary tourism because when you go to a country, food is one of the things tourists go to."

She was agriculture undersecretary for 12 years before Duterte casually appointed her late Tuesday at Malacañang during a meeting of the National Food Authority Council.

"He basically appointed me because he said I have been in the DA for so long, for 12 years already and there was no trace of corruption."

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Rody From Page 1

Puyat said.

She replaced Wanda Teo who resigned as DOT secretary Monday night at the height of controversy over the questionable advertising deal between the tourism department and the state-run People's Television Network Inc. The agreement involved the placement of P60 million in ads for a television program of Teo's brother Ben Tulfo.

"Medyo nagulat ako kasi pinag-utusapan namin agriculture tapos biglang naging tourism (I was a bit surprised because we were talking about agriculture then suddenly it was tourism)," she said.

Puyat admitted she has no plans for the DOT yet, but stressed she would continue to work on projects begun by Teo, including those promoting farm industry and local cuisine.

She said she wants to check first the plans of the DOT especially concerning rehabilitation efforts for Boracay and the country's possible hosting of the Miss Universe 2018.

The new tourism chief also vowed to observe transparency in all transactions. She promised to shun nepotism like what her father - former senator and foreign affairs chief Alberto Romulo - did when he was in government.

She revealed that as DA official, she had worked with

the DOT for the Madrid Fusion Manila, a major culinary event with Spain.

"We're on our fourth year. We've worked with the DOT for three years already with regard to Madrid Fusion," Puyat said.

"So it's all about culinary tourism. We might as well continue that as far as my background is concerned," she added.

She emphasized she's always ready to explore more ways of improving the country's tourism sector.

"Of course we should continue what programs are already working," she said.

On the six-month closure of Boracay to give way to rehabilitation work, she said she's leaving it to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) to deal with the issue.

"We will see. We will leave it up to their judgment," she said in a separate television interview.

In welcoming its new chief, the DOT said her expertise and experience would certainly bring more vigor to the department and help it attain its target under the National Tourism Development Plan for 2016-2022. The DOT hopes to boost tourist arrivals to 7.4 million this year.

"An advocate of farm and culinary tourism as evidenced in the DA's strong partnership with the DOT's Madrid Fusion Manila and farm tourism initiatives, the incoming secretary's expertise and experience present an advantage in steering the industry and promoting the Philippines as a premier tourist destination," the DOT said.

DA's loss

While sighs of relief greeted her entry into the DOT, her departure from the DA was met with uneasiness.

"She is a big loss to the DA, especially in our marketing advocacies. But I am happy for her," Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel Piñol told **The STAR**.

While Puyat's appointment as DOT chief caught him by surprise, Piñol said he respects the decision of the President as he knows Puyat is fit and qualified for the position.

"I was shocked because this was not discussed in the last Cabinet meeting. But I already had an inkling that she may be chosen," he said.

"Knowing her work habits and her honesty as a public official, I know she will excel as tourism secretary," Piñol added.

"Looking at the brighter side, she and I could now work closely and coordinate our efforts and funding in promoting farm tourism and agri-tourism," Piñol said.

Puyat's credentials and reputation have impressed senators who expect her to face smooth sailing before the Commission on Appointments (CA).

Senate President Pro Tempore Ralph Recto said Puyat "has done well in all her government postings," referring to her previous post as agriculture undersecretary.

"She has a clean record. She has good academic credentials and is very qualified to be the secretary of tourism. I look forward to working with her in developing our tourism industry. Good tourism policies will increase jobs and income for our people and will further sustain our growing economy," Puyat said.

Senate Majority Leader Miriam Solis III described her father was also an exemplary public servant.

Sen. Nancy Binay, chair of the tourism committee, said she was looking forward to working with Puyat, whom she expects to promote "the tourism agenda and bring her expertise in farm tourism and ecotourism along sustainable approaches to rural development."

Sen. Grace Poe said Puyat has the academic and professional credentials to lead the DOT and is known for promoting attractions and local culture of provinces she had been to as DA official.

"She is very personable and

articulate and is known in the circle of selling the Philippine brand," Sen. Sonny Angara said.

Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri, a member of the CA, said he expects the bicameral body to quickly confirm her appointment.

"I can truly vouch for her character and integrity as a person and her almost decade-long career in public service at the DA was one of outstanding performance and with no tales of corruption or controversy whatsoever," Zubiri said.

For Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez, Puyat is undoubtedly qualified for her new job. "She's qualified for the position. Good choice," Alvarez said.

"We support the decision of the President to further promote the tourism industry in the Philippines," Deputy Speaker Rened Amis said.

"She's the right person for the right job. She possesses the qualities of a good marketing person," Surigao del Norte Rep. Roldan B. Tolentino, chairman of the House committee on dangerous drugs, said.

"Puyat has a long and positive track record in government. We believe she is a worthy choice to replace outgoing secretary Wanda Tee," Paranaque Rep. Gas Tambunting, chairman of the House committee on games and amusement, said.

"I think she is highly capable of handling the job,"

said Eastern Samar Rep. Ben Pardo, chairman of the House committee on banks and financial intermediaries.

"The right person for the right job," Iloilo Rep. Rodito Albano, a member of the 12-man House CA contingent, said.

Meanwhile, Piñol said DA undersecretary for policy and planning Seyfredo Serrano will take over rice importation matters from Puyat.

Piñol, who is currently in Batanes, says the DA will have a meeting tomorrow to discuss new rules at the department.

The appointment of Puyat has also spawned reports that low Gabriel La Viña will replace her as DA undersecretary.

Just two weeks ago, La Viña was appointed as tourism undersecretary. He was Social Security System commissioner for more than a year but his dismissal in February due to alleged abuse of public funds.

"I am still waiting for the official communication on the matter. If it is indeed true," La Viña said in a text message to The STAR.

"I am and will continue to be a strong supporter of the President. For the record, I believe Liza Bernes is an excellent choice for DOT. She is beautiful, diligent and bright," he added, referring to the new tourism chief by her nickname.

- With Robertson Ramirez, Louise Maureen Simeon, Paolo Romero, Delon Porcalla, Christina Mendez

Hanoi to Beijing: Pull out missiles

By Frances G. Mangosing
@FMangosingINQ

Vietnam has requested China to withdraw its weapons from disputed territory in the South China Sea, while security experts have urged the Philippine government to upgrade the country's defenses in the Spratly archipelago in response to China's militarization of the strategic waterway.

"Vietnam requests that China, as a large country, show its responsibility in maintaining peace and stability in the East Sea, do not carry out militarization activities, withdraw military equipment illegally installed on features under Vietnam's sovereignty," international news agencies on Wednesday quoted Vietnamese foreign ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang as saying in a statement on Tuesday, using the Vietnamese name for the South China Sea.

The statement came after US news network CNBC reported on May 2 that China had installed antiship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on three Philippine-claimed reefs in the Spratly archipelago that it had seized and transformed into artificial islands then developed into military outposts—Kagitingan (international name: Fiery Cross), Zamora (Subi) and Panganiban (Mischief).

Vietnam is extremely concerned about the information [as reported] and reaffirms that all militarization activities, including the installation of missiles on Spratly islands, is a serious violation of Vietnam's sovereignty," Hang said.

China has earlier deployed similar weapons on Woody Island, the biggest feature in the Paracels archipelago farther to the north that Vietnam considers part of its territory.

No word yet from PH

While Vietnam has protested China's missile deployment in the disputed waterway, the administration of President Duterte has yet to say what it intends to do about the installation of high-tech weapons on Philippine territory.

Several lawmakers have urged the Duterte administration to protest the missile deployment, but presidential spokesperson Harry Roque has said the government has yet to verify the information because it does not have the technology to do so.

The government, however, is acquiring equipment that will enable it to verify the missile deployments, Roque told reporters on Tuesday.

China has neither confirmed nor denied the installation of weapons on the three Philippine reefs.

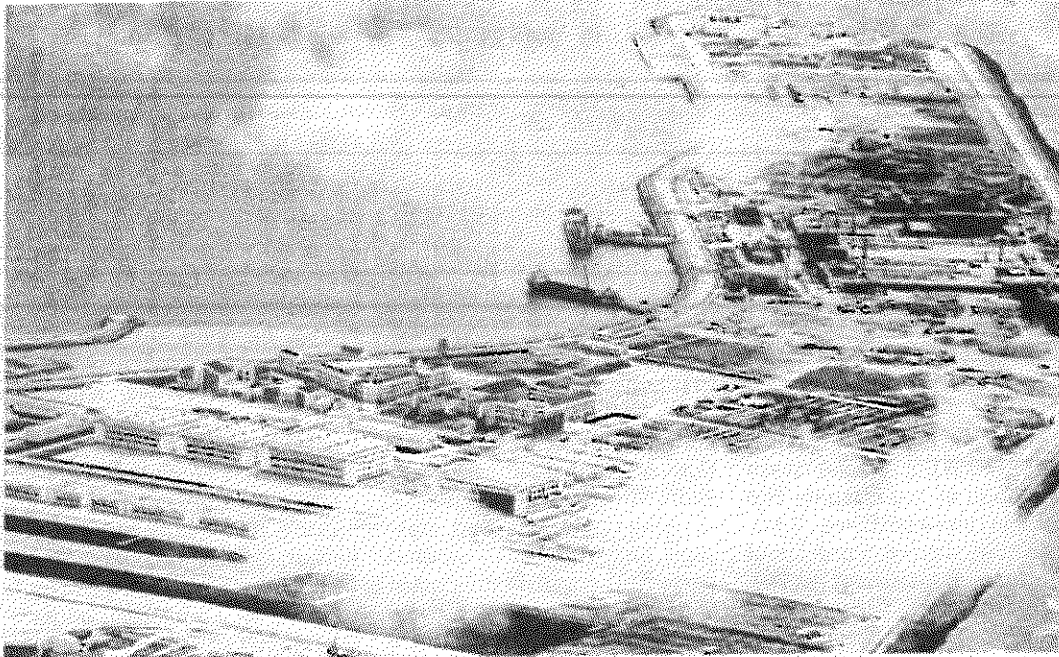
The Philippines' defense treaty ally, the United States, warned that China would face "consequences" over its militarization of the strategic waterway.

But Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said "China's peaceful construction in the Spratly archipelago, including the deployment of necessary national defense facilities, is aimed at protecting China's sovereignty and security."

Naval battles

Vietnam and China have fought naval battles over their conflicting claims in the South China Sea, while the Philippines has taken—and beaten—China to the UN-backed Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to resolve their own maritime dispute.

But instead of asserting the Philippines' legal victory, President Duterte, who came to power shortly before the tribunal handed down the decision in July 2016, mended fences with China and wooed the economic giant for aid, loans and investments.



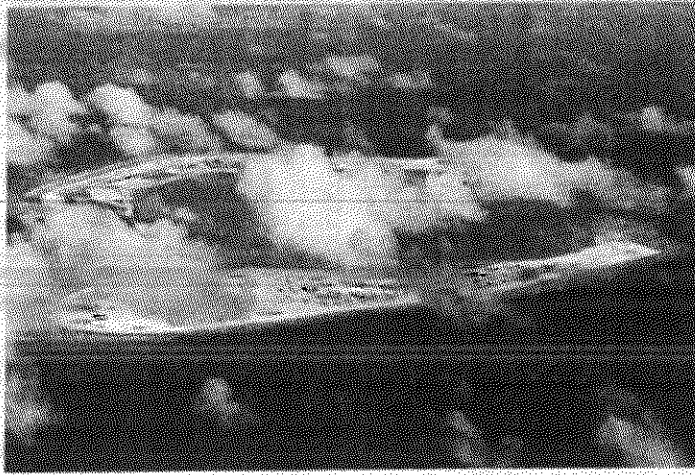
READY FOR OCCUPANCY China has completed buildings on Zamora Reef, as seen in this surveillance photo obtained by the inquirer.

China pledged to give Mr. Duterte billions of dollars in investment and aid. Beijing then proceeded to develop its military outposts on Philippine territory, which was discovered with the Inquirer's publication of surveillance photos in February and April showing nearly finished bases with airstrips, at least one with two military transport planes on the tarmac.

Alarmed at the Duterte administration's lack of initiative, lawmakers have called for legislative inquiries into China's actions in the South China Sea.

Sen. Panfilo Lacson on Wednesday called for a meeting of the National Security Council to tackle China's deployment of missiles on Philippine territory.

"If up to now the government still has not confirmed the presence of a foreign country's missiles (on three) of our islands, we may have a serious national security problem. Convening the National Security Council is the least that we



PH REEF The Philippines claims Zamora Reef, but it is occupied by China.

should do, given the situation," Lacson said in a statement.

'Be not timid'

Security experts also urged the administration to upgrade the country's outposts in the Spratlys, after the Inquirer reported that the Philippines has

been left behind by its rivals in development of their claims in the South China Sea.

"It is not fair to our [troops at] hardship posts in [the Spratlys] that the government is hardly upgrading our facilities there, yielding to China's objections," former National Security Adviser

Rollo Golez said on Wednesday.

The Philippines has stopped developing its outposts in the Spratlys to keep a 2002 claimants' agreement to maintain the status quo in the South China Sea.

But Golez said the government was "overdoing" its act not to antagonize China by not reinforcing the country's defenses in the Spratlys.

Golez cited Vietnam's development of its defenses in the South China Sea, saying Hanoi has demonstrated that "a good defense capability buildup is not incompatible with a vibrant economy."

Despite past violence in their maritime dispute, Vietnam and China maintain economic ties, though Hanoi continues to oppose Beijing's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, Golez said.

"The message: Be not timid in facing China," he said.

'For greater survivability'

Defense analyst Jose Antonio Custodio said the Philippines' defenses in the Spratlys must be improved "to allow for greater survivability" in case of "any eventuality such as hostile incidents or even natural calamities."

"Now, given that China has upped the ante by deploying missiles [on Philippine territory in the Spratlys], it becomes imperative to increase our defenses," Custodio said.

Jay Batongbacal, director of the University of the Philippines Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea, said upgrading the Philippines' outposts in the Spratlys could serve a "symbolic purpose."

"[It's] demonstrating resolve even in the face of China's intimidation. To do nothing would be to signal that we concede the South China Sea to China," Batongbacal said. —WITH REPORTS FROM LEILA B. SALAVERRIA, AP, AFP AND REUTERS INQ *ly*

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Lacson urges PRRD to convene NSC over China's missiles in the Spratlys

By MARIO R. CASAYUNAN

Sen. Panfilo M. Lacson on Wednesday called on President Duterte as Commander-in-Chief of the Philippine Republic to convene the National Security

Council (NSC) to discuss what the government should do with the battery of missiles installed by China in the contested Spratly islands in the South China Sea.

"If up to now, the government still has not confirmed the ▶6

Lacson urges PRRD...

◀1

presence of a foreign country's missiles in one of our islands, we may have a serious national security problem," Lacson, a former Philippine National Police (PNP) chief, said.

Aside from proposing an NSC meeting, Lacson said he also supports the call for the Senate to investigate the issue.

"Any serious matter that has security implications on our country, the Senate should step in and exercise our oversight function," he stressed.

A United States intelligence report showed that China has installed cruise missiles capable of hitting Palawan island.

"This is the single biggest threat to national security in recent decades," detained Sen. Leila de Lima said.

"But apparently, in line with the President's amorous affair with China, the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) has chosen to play the monkey that sees, hears and speaks no evil whenever it comes to China's aggressive escalation of military capabilities in the West Philippine Sea (WPS)," she added.

Sen. Gregorio B. Honasan, chairman of the Senate National Defense and Security Committee, admitted that the installation of the Chinese military apparatus is "alarming".

Since the United Nations Arbitration Court has rejected China's historical claim and awarded the contested Spratly territories to the Philippines, the Duterte administration should stand its ground, Honasan said.

Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV, a former Navy officer who used to patrol the Spratlys before the Philippines and China fought over the Spratlys, has filed a resolution asking the Honasan committee to investigate China's militarization of the Spratlys.

Sen. Paolo Benigno Aquino IV, a cousin of former President Benigno Simeon Aquino III, said China violated the Philippine Constitution when it placed a military base in the Spratlys which is a UN-recognized Philippine territory.

If there is a formal treaty between the Philippines and China on the placement by China of a military base in the Spratlys, the Philippine Senate should ratify it, he added.

Aquino recalled the previous administration locked horns with China over Philippine claimed territories in the South China sea and won its case.

"I just wish the Duterte administration fight China with the same fervor that the past administration did," Aquino said.

Hanoi demands Beijing withdraw missiles from disputed islands

Hanoi, Vietnam—Hanoi has demanded Beijing to remove military equipment from contested islands in the South China Sea, saying reported missile installations are a "serious violation" of Vietnam's sovereignty.

The warning follows a report from US network CNBC last week that China had installed anti-ship and air-to-air defenses on the Spratly Islands, which are also claimed by Vietnam.

China did not confirm the new military equipment but last week affirmed its right to build defense facilities in the South China Sea, of which it claims the majority.

Hanoi called Beijing's latest moves as a threat to peace and asserted Vietnam's historical and legal rights to the Spratly Islands, which it calls the Truong Sa islands.

"Vietnam... asserts that all militarization activities, including the arrangement of missiles on Truong Sa islands seriously violates Vietnam's sovereignty," Vietnam's foreign ministry spokeswoman Le Thi Thu Hang said in a statement late Tuesday.

"Vietnam requests China... not to militarize (and) withdraw military equipment.

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Hanoi demands Beijing withdraw missiles from disputed islands

From page 1

that were illegally deployed on structures under Vietnam's sovereignty, the statement added.

Vietnam and China have long sparred over their competing claims in the South China Sea, which is believed to be rich in oil and gas deposits.

Washington warned last week that Beijing would face "consequences" over its militarization of the disputed waterway.

But Beijing defended its "peaceful construction" in the Spratly archipelago as necessary to protect

its own sovereignty and security.

Though the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei also have claims in the sea, Vietnam has remained the most vocal opponent to Beijing's build up in the sea.

Tensions reached a fever pitch in 2014 when Beijing moved an oil rig into a part of the sea claimed by Hanoi, sparking violent protests in Vietnam.

Senators call for probe

Senator Panfilo Lacson also joined the snowballing call to have the upper chamber conduct an inquiry into the reported installation of missiles system by the Chinese government on three Philippine-

claimed reefs in the Spratly archipelago.

"I support the call for the Senate to investigate the issue. Any serious matter that has security implications on our country, the Senate should step in and exercise our oversight function," Lacson, vice chairman of the Senate committee on national defense and security, said.

"If up to now, the government still has not confirmed the presence of a foreign country's missiles in one of our islands, we may have a serious national security problem. Convening the National Security Council (NSC) is the least that we should do, given

the situation," he said.

Lacson was obviously referring to the pronouncements coming from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) saying that the matter is still in the process of verification even if its Chinese counterpart already confirmed the presence of the missile system.

A number of senators have come out expressing alarm over this latest development and appeared to be unanimous on the idea on being briefed on what is happening in the Spratlys.

Even Senate President Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel agreed on the conduct of a probe saying that the

Senate foreign relations committee should first find out what is really happening while the DFA should determine what it intends to do with China's latest movement in the disputed area.

Sen. Gregorio Honasan, chairman of the Senate committee on national defense and security, likewise a former military officer, admitted that the move of the Chinese military is alarming.

The government, he said, has all the rights to protest the action of the Chinese government especially since the United Nations (UN) arbitral tribunal already ruled out China's

claims in the contested Spratly Islands.

"The Duterte administration should stand its ground on this issue," he said.

Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV, also a former military officer, has filed a resolution in the Senate calling for a probe on the matter and urging the Duterte administration to uphold the sovereign rights of the country.

Opposition Sen. Bam Aquino said he's also poised to file a resolution to look into the apparent attempt of China to put up a military base in the country's territory.

Angie M. Rosales

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INQUIRER

A4

PH, US HOLD DRILLS AMID FRESH WEST PHILIPPINE SEA CONCERNS

By **Frances G. Mangosing**
@inquirerdotnet

SAN ANTONIO, ZAMBALES— At a naval base facing the West Philippine Sea (WPS), hundreds of Philippine and US Marines retake a "threatened" area as part of their annual military drills.

Lt. Gen. Emmanuel Salamat, Philippines Balikatan exercise director, said their objective was to secure a "threatened" area from an "enemy."

Some 180 Filipino Marines and 160 of their US counterparts participated in Wednesday's amphibious landing exercise.

The troops, backed by three US Marines amphibious assault vehicles, stormed the shoreline after they were ferried from the strategic sealift vessel BRP Davao del Sur.

The year's military drills is the largest under President Duterte, who had previously threatened to scrap them due

to his animosity toward the United States and its policies.

But Anakpawis party-list Rep. Ariel Casilao said the exercises had already been proven "useless" in developing "the country's capacity to defend against foreign aggressors at the moment, such as China [which] has already built up its military power in the (WPS)."

Salamat said the 10-day drills, held 180 kilometers from Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal in the WPS, have nothing to do with China's increasing militarization of the disputed waterway.

The recent report on China's missile deployment in the Spratlys has raised concerns in the United States, Vietnam, Philippines and other countries.

"[The exercises have] nothing to do with anything else. Our focus is our military-to-military cooperation," Salamat said. —WITH A REPORT FROM JEROME ANING INQ A4

Phl, US troops storm 'enemy' in Zambales military exercises

By JAIME LAUDE

Some 340 Filipino and American troops stormed and neutralized "enemy" positions along the coastline of San Antonio, Zambales yesterday.

This was among the highlights of the Balikatan joint military exercises between the Philippines and US troops for this year.

Balikatan is the yearly joint military training carried out in the country under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the United States.

Balikatan-Philippines spokesperson Lt. Liezl Vidallon said 180 Filipino sailors and Marines took part in the coastal assault with around 160 American troops.

Three American amphibious assault vehicles and two landing craft from the Philippine Navy's landing dock ship *BRP Davao del Sur* took part in the drill.

Providing extra muscle to the mock beachhead assault was the Navy's frigate *BRP Ramon Alcaraz*.

Simultaneously hitting the beaches, combined Filipino and American troops engaged the "enemies" in close quarter battle in an urban setting.

careful efforts by the military to restrain their unpredictable president.

"The fact it's being done under this administration means they (Duterte's government) now have a better understanding of the security equation," political analyst Victor Andres Manhit said.

Though the bulked-up maneuvers – including a live-fire component that was dropped last year – took place on a naval base just 180 kilometers east of Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal that China has controlled since 2012, the drill's leaders barely mentioned Beijing.

"We are an island nation. That's why we need to improve our capabilities on amphibious operations," Army Major General Emmanuel Salamat told reporters.

"We're not concerned about Scarborough. We're concerned about what we're doing here."

The joint troops will also take part in live fire exercises in a gunnery range at Crow Valley in Tarlac, as well as land combat drills at the Army's base in Fort Magsaysay, Nueva Ecija.

A small number of troops from the Australian Defense Force (ADF) as well as those from Japan are also participating in this year's land-based combat drill.

The decades-old tradition appeared headed for the history books last year as newly elected President Duterte pivoted toward China – and away from long-time Philippine ally the US.

But the number of troops taking part in the drills has increased by a third from last year to 8,000, a return to figures seen in years past when the exercises served as a thinly veiled deterrent to a rising China.

Duterte's change of heart on the two-week Balikatan may be due to what experts see as

China claims most of the South China Sea, a strategic waterway believed to harbor significant oil and natural gas deposits, but this was ruled illegal in 2016 after Duterte's predecessor Benigno Aquino III filed suit before an international maritime tribunal.

Duterte has since reversed course and set the ruling aside, along with long-simmering friction over competing claims to the waters, in order to court Chinese trade and investment.

He has also cut two major annual naval exercises with the US and last year reduced the Balikatan contingent to 5,400 US and Filipino troops.

The decision came at a low point for US-Philippine relations, when Duterte called the American ambassador "gay" and served notice that the 2017 edition would "be the last military exercise" with the United States.

– With Jose Rodel Clapano, AFP

US, PH troops 'storm' beach in bulked-up drills

SAN ANTONIO, Philippines: US and Philippine troops stormed ashore from the disputed South China Sea on Wednesday for military exercises that President Rodrigo Duterte had

promised to scrap, but quietly allowed to carry on.

The decades-old tradition appeared headed for the history books last year as a newly elected

Duterte pivoted toward China — and away from long-time Philippine ally the US.

But the number of troops taking part in the drills has increased by a

third from last year to 8,000, a return to figures seen in years past when the exercises served as a thinly veiled deterrent to a rising China.

► Drills A2

US, PH troops 'storm' beach in bulked-up drills

The reason for Duterte's change of heart on the two-week drills codenamed "Balikatan," or "Shoulder-to-Shoulder," may be down to what experts see as careful efforts by the Filipino military to restrain their unpredictable president.

"The fact it's being done under this administration means they [Duterte's government] now have a better understanding of the security equation," political analyst Victor Andres Manhit said.

Though the bulked-up maneuvers — including a live-fire component that was dropped last year — took place on a naval base just 180 kilometers (110 miles) east of the Filipino-claimed Scarborough Shoal that China has controlled since 2012, the drill's leaders barely mentioned Beijing.

"We are an island nation. That's why we need to improve our capabilities on amphibious operations," Maj. Gen. Emmanuel Salamat told reporters.

"We're not concerned about Scarborough. We're concerned about what we're doing here."

China claims most of the South China Sea, a strategic waterway believed to harbor significant oil and natural gas deposits, but this was ruled illegal in 2016 after Duterte's predecessor Benigno Aquino filed

suit before an international maritime tribunal.

Duterte has since reversed course and set the ruling aside, along with long-simmering friction over competing claims to the waters, in order to court Chinese trade and investment.

He has also cut two major annual naval exercises with the US and last year reduced the Balikatan contingent to 5,400 US and Filipino troops.

US Marine Lieutenant-Colonel Daniel Gaskell, who took part in the landing exercise Wednesday, sidestepped media questions on Duterte's anti-US claims.

"We are welcomed here, walking in the airport, throughout your country, [but also] by the Filipino armed forces who we've interacted with," he said.

"So we're really happy to be here," Gaskell added.

China a 'threat'

China remains a 'threat' and is capable of delivering a deathblow in the South China Sea (West Philippine Sea), a congressman said on Wednesday.

Rep. Rufino Biazon of Muntinlupa City, vice chairman of the House Committee on National Defense and National Security, made the

statement when asked if the Asian superpower could go as far as killing soldiers of other nations in the name of claiming indisputable sovereignty on the islands in the entire South China Sea.

China's military killed at least 100 Vietnamese soldiers in a standoff in the Paracel Islands in the contested sea in 1974.

Paracel is part of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (Unclos).

In 1988, Chinese forces also killed 64 Vietnamese soldiers during a battle in Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

"I would expect them [Chinese] to do the same [moves] as what happened in the past, especially now that they have installed military facilities like missile systems [in the South China Sea]. With such military equipment in place, you can be sure that they have set up a defensive perimeter in the event that someone or some fleet comes in near them. That's an automatic [response]," Biazon told *The Manila Times* in a phone interview.

"If something or someone comes near those facilities, you can expect China to challenge them, if not fire at them. What is disheartening here is that this is happening within our EEZ. It is us who have

sovereign rights there and yet we will be considered a threat if we make a move. China is the threat here," he added.

Biazon said the Philippines must take action against China's installation of anti-ship cruise missile and surface-to-air missile systems in the Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratlys that are all within the Philippines' EEZ.

Response, he added, could start with a diplomatic protest or even a statement calling for China to stop its militarization of its own EEZ just like what Vietnam, also a claimant to territories in the South China Sea, did.

Vietnam had called moves of the Chinese military "a serious violation of Vietnam's sovereignty."

Hanoi has demanded Beijing remove military equipment from contested islands in the South China Sea.

Hanoi called the latest moves a threat to peace and asserted Vietnam's historical and legal rights to the islands, which it calls the Truong Sa islands.

"Vietnam requests China... not to militarize [and] withdraw military equipment that were illegally deployed on structures under Vietnam's sovereignty," foreign ministry spokeswoman Le Thi Thu Hang said in a statement late Tuesday.

LLANESCA T. PANTI, AFP

PH-US starts war games in WPS; 8,000 taking part

US AND Philippine troops stormed ashore from the disputed South China Sea on Wednesday for military exercises that President Rodrigo Duterte had promised to scrap, but quietly allowed to carry on.

The decades-old tradition appeared headed for the history books last year as a newly elected Duterte pivoted toward China—and away from long-time Philippine ally the US.

But the number of troops taking part in the drills has increased by a third from last year to 8,000, a return to the figures seen in years past when the exercises served as a thinly veiled deterrent to a rising China.

Meanwhile, a maritime law expert said Wednesday Duterte's planned visit to the Philippine Rise or Benham Rise next week would be "unfortunate."

Jay Batongbacal, director of the UP Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea, said the continental shelf was not a hotly contested area and the government should instead work on asserting its rights on the West Philippine Sea.

"The fact that it's happening now while these issues are flaring up again in the West Philippine Sea sort of gives our people a bad impression," he told ANC's *Beyond Politics*.

The reason for Duterte's change of heart on the two-week drills code-named "*Balikatan*", or "Shoulder-to-Shoulder", may be down to what experts see as careful efforts by the Philippine military to restrain their unpredictable president. **AFP**

COA commends AFP Commissary for exceeding sales target

By **ELIZABETH MARCELO**

The Commission on Audit (COA) has commended the Armed Forces of the Philippines Commissary and Exchange Service (AFPCES) for a significant increase in its sales of subsidized goods to the institution's military and civilian personnel.

In an annual audit report posted on its website, the COA said that for 2017, the AFPCES registered sales amounted to P2.611 billion, a 12.14-percent or P282.53-million increase from its total sales in 2016 amounting to P2.328 billion.

The audit body said AFPCES' actual sales for 2017

even exceeded by five percent or P111.95 million its P2.499-billion target for the year, contrary to 2016 when it failed to reach its P2.755-billion target.

The COA attributed the AFPCES' improved performance to "sufficient inventory/stocks of saleable and fast moving merchandise."

"The managers were directed and constantly being reminded by the operations unit to prioritize the replenishment of basic commodities, saleable and fast moving items," the COA report read.

Established in 1972, AFPCES serves as the military's support unit, which enjoys tax exemptions from the De-

partment of Finance and the Bureau of Internal Revenue in exchange for selling subsidized goods to the AFP's uniformed and civilian personnel.

The COA said that of the AFPCES' 42 outlets nationwide, only 14 were not able to meet their target sales, but their realization rate ranges from 80 percent to 99 percent.

Only two outlets – the AFP Main Gas Station and the AFP Medical Center Gas Station – registered a low realization rate of 21 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

The COA, however, said the AFP Main Gas Station's failure to meet its target, was understandable as the AFPCES

management sometime last year ordered the outlet to stop selling gasoline and diesel due to the reported leaks in the bed auxiliary tanks.

The COA noted that the AFPCES has pending request with Petron to rehabilitate the said tanks.

The COA also cited the AFPCES' good coordination with various suppliers which led to the continuous deliveries of stocks to stores/outlets.

It was even able to extend support to the military during the five-month battle in Marawi City last year by distributing free groceries to the troops and to the families of the soldiers killed in action.

AFP-DENR team finds illegal logs in Agusan river

By MIKE U. CRISMUNDO

CAMP BANCASI, Butuan City -

Combined elements of the 26th Infantry Battalion (26th IB) and the Community Environment and Natural Resources



RELENTLESS DRIVE - Members of the government's anti-illegal logging task force take an inventory of the illegal logs that were found on the banks of Adgaon River in Purok 12, Barangay Poblacion, La Paz, Agusan del Sur province. (Photos courtesy of 26th IB, 4th ID PAO/Manila Bulletin)

Office (CENRO) satellite office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) discovered round logs of mixed dipterocarp species in Purok 12, Barangay Poblacion, La Paz, Agusan del Sur province.

The more than 100 illegally-cut logs with an estimated volume of 30 cubic meters were hidden at a bridge along the Adgaon River when found by the anti-illegal logging task force.

The joint AFP-DENR team responded from the information of a concerned citizen who reported the presence of the logs at the river banks.

In its initial investigation, the logs were believed to come from the hinterlands of San Luis and La Paz and were flushed downstream by the heavy rains.

The logs were retrieved by CENRO La Paz for proper disposition.

As of press time, the owner of the discovered logs has yet to be identified.

Lt. Col. Rommel S. Pagayon, commanding officer of 26th IB said residents of San Luis town are now more

vigilant about reporting illegal logging activities in their area.

In a separate statement on Sunday, Col. Andres C. Centino, commanding officer of the Army's 401st Infantry (Unity) Brigade with operational control over 26th IB, said AFP units under his Command have been actively supporting the DENR in its anti-illegal logging campaign.

As of May 8, the 401st Brigade's field units have been able to conduct six anti-illegal logging operations with the DENR and local police, which resulted in the confiscation of 7,313 board feet of assorted lumbers and closure of one mini saw mill.

"The 401st Brigade is supporting the anti-illegal logging campaign of the DENR as our contribution in protecting the environment. We therefore, appeal to our people in Agusan Del Sur and Surigao Del Sur to help in the government's campaign to stop the illegal logging practice in order to help protect our environment and prevent the disasters that may happen once our forest are denuded," Centino added. DAC

'Bato' satisfied with situation of high-profile inmates at Isafp hq

Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) Director Ronald "Bato" de la Rosa is satisfied over the situation of eight high-profile inmates now being detained at the headquarters of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (Isafp) at Camp Aguinaldo.

This, after de la Rosa personally checked yesterday on Herbet Colangco, Robert Durano, Jerry Pipino, Noel Martinez, German Agojo, Jaime Patio, Thomas Donina and Rodolfo Maglen.

"It's okay. I am quite satisfied," de la Rosa told reporters after his visit to the detention facility of the eight inmates who served as resource persons during Senate inquiry into illegal drugs trade.

De la Rosa said the eight also provided suggestions for him to totally address the illegal drug problem at the New Bilibid Prison (NBP) compound.

"They have suggestions, recommendations on how to stop illegal drug trade inside the Bilibid, very good solutions...coming from the mouth of the reformists...I think they are viable and very good

By Mario J. Mallari

solutions," de la Rosa said.

The eight were previously incarcerated at the NBP compound in Muntinlupa City but were transferred to Camp Aguinaldo after they testified against other convicted drug lords.

De la Rosa said the purpose of his visit is to ensure that the inmates are no longer engaged in illegal drug trade and they are not enjoying luxury.

"I just thought that while we are very strict at the Bilibid (NBP)... *baka wala na talagang transaction ng droga dun, baka dito naman sila magta-transact...they might think, they have the privilege being state witness, they might think we are indebted to them,*" de la Rosa explained.

Earlier, de la Rosa had personally talked to high-profile inmates at the NBP, led by Jaybee Sebastian and Peter Co, and warned them to stop their illegal drug operations or face his wrath.

De la Rosa said he also talked with the inmates at Isafp and

inspected their rooms.

"I talked to them and told them that even if you are state witnesses, you can also be dying witnesses if you continue to be involved in illegal drugs trade," he said.

But the BuCor chief cited the strict security setup at Isafp as a big hindrance for the inmates to think about doing illegal activities.

"With the situation here, it seems that it is far-fetched that they can still transact, first, because guards here are difficult to corrupt—there are composite team from BuCor, SAF (Special Action Force) and Isafp," de la Rosa said.

"I don't think the AFP would allow drug trading within its compound," he added.

During the inspection, de la Rosa said he did not see any contraband, including cellphones, inside the rooms of the eight inmates.

"So far, there was none...they thought it was just a visit but I conducted *gatugad* and I did not see any cellphone...I wanted to check them for myself," de la Rosa said.

PCSO message: All parents want educated children

"NO PARENT in his right mind would not like to send their children to school. Every parent's dream is to see their children go up the stage and receive a diploma more so a degree."

This is the message of Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office general manager Alexander Balutan during the second anniversary of the Philippine Army Officers' Ladies Club Inc., educational assistance program in Fort Bonifacio, Metro Manila recently where he was the guest of honor and speaker.

As a former Marine general, Balutan understood the plight of the soldiers who were deployed in the field, sacrificing their lives to protect the country.

"Soldiers are not only determined and dedicated to provide a better place for Filipinos to live in, but also the determination to give their children a better life by giving them the education that they deserve," Balutan said.

A battle-tested Mindanao veteran who earned the moniker "Mandirigma" in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Balutan said when he was still in the active service, he would always look forward to the day when he would be able to call back home and talk to his kids, listen to their stories about their studies, their score in a particular test, and especially their grades every grading period.

"We, soldiers, after a long and bloody fight, when we call back home, more or less, there are only two questions that we immediately ask: *Kamusta ang mga bata at kamusta ang pag-aaral ng mga baid? Minsan nga 'di pa kayo naka-kamusta 'di ba?* [referring to the military wives]," Balutan said.

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11,103 martial law victims to get indemnity

SOME 11,103 victims of human rights violations during martial law—from 1972 to 1981—are set to receive indemnification as the government's claims board wraps up its work this Saturday.

The number represents only 14 percent of the total 75,749 claims filed because the rest failed to submit "substantial evidence" required by the Human Rights Victims' Claims Board, its chairwoman Lina Sarmiento said Wednesday.

Claimants will get their compensation from Ferdinand Marcos' secret Swiss bank deposits worth P10 billion—the amount of indemnification based on the gravity of abuse suffered by victims.

A maximum of 10 points worth P1.76 million are assigned for those who were killed or victims of enforced disappearance, Sarmiento said.

Despite the tight deadline, she said some surviving family members were yet to decide who among them should receive the amounts to be released by the board through LandBank.

Meanwhile, military units attached to the Joint Task Force Sulu have rescued one of the men kidnapped along with two female police officers near the Jolo Airport last April 29.

"At 2 p.m. on May 8, 2018, KV [kidnap victim] Blas Jackosalim Ahamad, a resident of Sitio Palar, Barangay Gandasuli, Patikul, Sulu was rescued by the troops of Marine Battalion Landing Team 3, led by Lt. Col. Rarnil DC Hoigado at Sitio Budjang, Barangay Libog Kabao, Panglima Estino, Sulu," Brig. Gen. Cirifito Sobejana, JTF Sulu commander, said in a statement Wednesday.

Ahamad, Faizal Ahidji, PO2 Bemierose Alvarez, and PO1 Dimah Gumahad were abducted by the Abu Sayyaf Group under sub-leader Almujer Yadah last April 29.

Negros militants hit suppression of civilians

By MARK L. GARCIA

BACOLOD CITY—Militants in Negros Occidental condemned the killing of a peasant leader and the detention of two civilians in separate areas of Negros Occidental earlier this month.

In a press conference Wednesday, leaders of Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas, Bagong Alyansang Makahayan, Karapatan-Negros, and Northern Negros Alliance of Human Rights Advocates denounced the incidents as violations of the peasants' human rights.

Jerry Turga, KMP vice chair, was gunned down on April 28 in Moises Padilla Town, and Julie Ruel, 22, and Emarine Pastedio, 20, were arrested and locked up by soldiers from the

Army's 79th Infantry Battalion on May 1 in San Carlos City.

KMP National Secretary General Antonio Flores said the group's fact-finding mission in Moises Padilla found that the police did not gather evidence in the killing of Turga but merely asked details from his neighbors.

Earlier reports indicated that the New People's Army (NPA) killed Turga.

Turga was the 26th peasant leader killed in Negros Occidental since President Duterte assumed office.

Flores said Duterte's Oplan Kapayapaan and the military's have "unleashed the worst kind of terror to farmers and civilians."

"If the farmer leaders who are

just fighting for their land rights will continue to be tagged as members of NPA, this will not stop," he said.

Flores said the results of fact-finding mission will form the basis for a case KMP will submit to the International Criminal Court.

Bayan-Negros Chairman Christian Tuayon said a climate of impunity pervades in Moises Padilla.

"Because of this, no one is openly testifying. We call on authorities to act on it, especially the police to conduct in-depth investigation," Tuayon said.

Karapatan-Negros Secretary-General Clarizza Singson said the military, in its desperation to eliminate the NPA, is targeting civilians like Ruel and Pastedio as sympathizers of the rebel group.

COMMUNIST REBELS BURN NIA EQUIPMENT IN NEGROS

BACOLOD CITY: Suspected New People's Army (NPA) rebels burned heavy equipment and materials owned by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) in Sitio Tagbak, Barangay Tan-awan, Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental, on Monday night. Capt. Ruel Llanes, spokesman for the Army's 303rd Infantry Brigade (IB), said about 20 NPA members set fire to a backhoe, a generator set and the bunkhouse for workers. The machines were being used in the construction of a dam in the area, a project of the NIA. The rebels fired their guns before fleeing to neighboring Sitio Bahi. Brig. Gen. Eliezer Losañes, 303rd IB commander, said the military and Kabankalan City police have dispatched troops to hunt down the suspects. The NPA has claimed responsibility for the torching of a cargo truck in La Castellana town and a tractor in Canlaon City last March.

EUGENE Y. ADIONG

NPA SURVIVOR IN BUKIDNON CLASH SURRENDERS

CAMP EVANGLISTA, Cagayan de Oro City: A battle-scarred rebel of the New People's Army (NPA) who survived after days of a running gunbattle with Philippine Army troops in Bukidnon surrendered on Tuesday. Lt. Tere Ingente, spokesman for the Army's 4th Infantry Division, identified the surrenderer as Anacleto Sanugan Sagula Jr., 32, alias "Jeepy" of Barangay Hagpa in Impasug-ong town. Sagula told the military that he was one of the NPA combatants who figured in an encounter with 8th Infantry Battalion (IB) troops in the "Victory" in Barangay San Luis, Malitbog town. Ingente said Sagula surrendered to the 8th IB patrol base in San Luis with his loaded AK 47 assault rifle. Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Ronald Illana, 8th IB commanding officer, said troops also recovered the body of an unidentified NPA combatant during a clearing operation in the area on Sunday. The body was turned over to Datu Juliano Lipangga, who was contacting relatives or families of the slain rebel.

A7 CRIS DIAZ

5 NPA supporters surrender

SECURITY authorities said five more members of the New People's Army's "Militia Ng Bayan" voluntarily surrendered to security troops in Ambaguio, Nueva Vizcaya on Monday.

In a statement Tuesday, Capt. Jefferson Somera, 5th Infantry Division spokesperson, said the five rebel supporters turned themselves in to troopers of the 54th Infantry Battalion and personnel of the Ambaguio Police at the Landing Patrol Base in Barangay Poblacion.

Somera said their surrender was made possible through the intervention of Barangay Ammoweg.

Before their surrender, the five served as contacts, couriers and spies of regular NPAs operating in the area.

As of this posting, they were being debriefed at the Landing Patrol Base.

As of Jan. 1, the 5th Infantry Division had recorded the surrender of seven NPA rebels and 63 "Militia Ng Bayan" members. PNA 10

Marines rescue hostage; 2 Abus slain

BY ROEL PAREÑO

ZAMBOANGA CITY – The other civilian taken with two policewomen by Abu Sayyaf bandits in Patikul, Sulu was rescued on Tuesday.

Personnel of the Marine Battalion Landing Team 3 led by Lt. Col. Ramil Holgado rescued Blas Jackosolim Ahamad in Sitio Budjang, Barangay Libog Kabao, Panglima Estimo at about 2 p.m., according to Brig. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana.

On Saturday, Faizal Ahidji was freed in Sitio Daang Puti, Barangay Bangkal in Patikul. He was brought to the Joint Task Force Sulu for debriefing.

"The information Ahidji shared to us led to the rescue of Ahamad," Sobejana said.

Ahamad and Ahidji as well as Police Officer 2 Benierose Alvarez and POI Dinah Gumahad had just visited their friends at a military camp when they were snatched in Barangay

Liang on April 29.

As government troopers launched another operation yesterday to rescue the policewomen, two Abu Sayyaf bandits, one of them identified as Abrajir Jamsuri, alias Radis, were killed in an encounter in Barangay Lagasan, Parang.

Four high-powered firearms were recovered at the scene.

A rescue operation on Monday left three bandits dead and seven soldiers wounded.

Sobejana said they would continue to uphold the no-ransom policy even as he gave assurance that government troopers would exhaust all efforts to rescue the remaining hostages and neutralize the Abu Sayyaf.

The kidnappers demanded P5 million in exchange for the release of the policewomen.

"With the support of local government officials, religious leaders, the sultanate of Sulu, other stakeholders and the community as a whole, we may safely rescue the remaining victims," Sobejana said.

The Abu Sayyaf is also holding a Dutch man, a Vietnamese, three Indonesians and five other Filipinos.

Kidnap suspect held

In Basilan, Langa Jamil Francisco, 52, alias Teng, who has a pending warrant for seven counts of kidnapping and serious illegal detention, was arrested in Barangay Sta. Barbara in this city on Tuesday.

Francisco was tagged in the kidnapping of Golden Harvest Plantation workers in Barangay Tairan, Lantawan, Basilan on June 11, 2001. ☐

2 Abu kidnapper todas sa encounter

Dalawa pang bandi-dong Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) na sangkot sa pagbihag sa apat katao kabilang ang dalawang pulis ang napaslang sa pakikipag-engkuwentro sa tropa ng militar sa rescue mission sa Brgy. Lagasan, Parang, Sulu nitong Miyerkules.

Kinilala ni Brig. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana, Commander ng Joint Task Force (JTF) Sulu, ang isa sa napatay na suspek na sina Abrar Jam-suri alyas Radis habang maalam pa ang pagkakakilanlan sa isa pa na pawang mula sa command ni Abu Sayyaf Sub-Leader Apo Mike.

Ayon kay Sobejana, ala-1:30 ng hapon nang

makasagupa ng Special Forces Troopers ng 4th Special Forces Battalion ang grupo ng mga kidnappers sa kagubatan ng nasabing lugar. Kasalukuyang nagsasagawa ng search and rescue mission ang mga sundalo sa mga bihag na dalawang babaeng pulis na sina PO2 Benierose Alvarez at PO1 Dinah Gumahud nang masabat ang mga armadong kidnappers na nauwi sa bakbakan na tumagal ng 40 minuto.

Nauna rito, matagumpay na nasagip ng tropa ng Philippine Marine ang isa pang hostage ASG matapos ang bakbakan sa liblib

na lugar sa Brgy. Kabao, Panglima Estino, Sulu kamakalawa.

Ayon kay Joint Task Force (JTF) Sulu Commander Brig. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana, dakong alas-2 ng hapon nang mailigtas ng tropa ng Marine Battalion Landing Team (MBLT) 3 sa pamumuno ni Lt. Col. Ramil Holgado ang bihag na si Jackosalem Blas Ahamad matapos ang bakbakan sa kagubatan ng Sitio Budjang, Brgy. Libog Kabao, Panglima Estino ng lalawigan. *(Joy Cantos)*

Military appeals to Muslim folk for help in recovering Abu hostages

By FRANCIS T. WAKEFIELD

The commander of the Armed Forces of the Philippines-Joint Task Force (JTF) Sulu yesterday said the support of the local government units, the religious leaders, the Sultanate of Sulu, other stakeholders and the community as a whole, may help in their efforts of rescuing the other kidnap victims of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Brig. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana made the statement following the release of a kidnap victim and the rescue of another the last several days.

Sobejana said at 2 p.m. Tuesday, kidnap victim Blas Jackosalim Ahamad, a resident of Sitio Palar, Brgy Gandasuli, Patikul, Sulu, was rescued by the troops of Marine Battalion Landing Team (MBLT) 3 led by Lt. Col. Ramil Holgado in Sitio Budjang, Barangay Libog Kabao, in Panglima Estino, Sulu.

Ahamad is one of the four persons abducted last April 29, together with two female policemen by the an ASG faction led by Almujeer Yadah.

The other civilian abducted, Faizal Ahidji, was freed May 5 in Sitio Daang Puti, Barangay Bangkal in Patikul, Sulu.

The bandit group continues to have in its custody PO2 Benierose Alvarez and PO1 Dinah Gumahad, both of the Zamboanga City Police.

Sobejana said Ahamad is undergoing custodial debriefing at the JTF Sulu headquarters after going through a thorough medical examination at Kuta General Teodulfo Bautista Station Hospital in Busbus, Jolo, Sulu.

"The valuable information (Ahidji) shared with us led to the rescue of Blas Jackosalim Ahamad. Efforts to rescue the remaining kidnap victims shall continue," Sobejana said. ||

Abu Sayyaf captive escapes

BY VICTOR REYES

A CIVILIAN kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu last month, along with two policewomen and another civilian, escaped Monday night during a firefight between Marines and the bandits in Talipao town.

Driver Blas Jackosalim Ahamad was found Tuesday in Sitio Budjang, Barangay Libog Kabao in Panglima Estino town by troops from the Marine Battalion Landing Team 3, said Brig. Gen. Cirilino

Sobejana, commander of the military's Joint Task Force Sulu.

The firefight occurred in Barangay Buhanginan in Patikul town. Three of the bandits died in the clash.

Sobejana said the encounter was the result of information provided by Faizal Ahidji, a travel guide who was released by the Abu Sayyaf on Saturday in Barangay Bangkay, also in Patikul town.

A police report on the release identified Ahidji as Faizal Ahidji

See ABU ► Page B6

ABU

Hambali, correcting earlier reports identifying him as Faizal Ahari.

Ahidji, Ahamad, PO2 Benierose Alvarez, and PO1 Dinah Gumahad were kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf on April 29 in Patikul town, while on their way to Jolo town.

Sobejana could not immediately say if ransom was paid for the release of Ahidji but stressed that the military is abiding by government's

no-ransom policy.

Sobejana said Ahamad told the military that the two policewomen are "okay but the situation is tense, corroborating earlier revelations by Abu Sayyaf men who surrendered that they are scared of armed engagements with the military."

"Definitely, we will not stop until they are rescued," he also said.

In Zamboanga City Tuesday, police arrested an

Abu Sayyaf member wanted for seven counts of kidnapping and serious illegal detention.

Langa Jamil Francisco, 52, was nabbed in a police operation Barangay Sta. Barbara.

Police have yet to determine what kidnapping cases Francisco was involved in. Arrest warrants have been issued by the Isabela, Basilan Regional Trial Court Branch 10. — *With Raymond Africa*

Gov't forces rescued Abu Sayyaf kidnap victim

Government forces safely rescued a kidnap victim from the hands of the terrorist Abu Sayyaf group in the outskirts of Panglima Estino town in Sulu province on Tuesday, the military said yesterday.

Brig. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana, commander of the Joint Task Force-Sulu (JTF-Sulu), said that Blas Jacasalem Ahamad was rescued at around 2 p.m. by elements of the Marine Battalion Landing Team-3 (MBLT-3) while on patrol along Sitio Budjang, Barangay Libog Kabao.

"The rescued kidnap victim underwent custodial debriefing at JTF-Sulu Headquarters after getting thorough medical examination," said Sobejana.

It was not clear, however, how the troops rescue Ahamad.

Ahamad was with POS Bernierose Alvarez, PO1 Dinah Gumahad and Faizal Ahidji last April 29 when they were abducted by the Abu Sayyaf band of sub-leader Almujer Yadah in Patikul town.

On Saturday, Ahidji was freed by the Abu Sayyaf terrorists. It was not clear if the family of Ahidji paid ransom for his freedom. He claimed that relent military operations prompted his captors to leave him at a forest

in Patikul.

Earlier, the military said that the Abu Sayyaf demanded P150,000 ransom each for Ahidji and Ahamad.

On the other hand, Philippine National Police (PNP) chief Director General Oscar Albayalde said that the kidnap men asked P5 million for Alvarez and Gumahad.

Authorities, however, stressed the government's no ransom policy.

Sobejana vowed that relentless military operations against the Abu Sayyaf to rescue the two policewomen and other hostages.

"Efforts to rescue the remaining KVs (kidnap victims) shall continue. With the support of the local government units, the religious leaders, the Sultanate of Sulu, other stakeholders and the community as a whole, we may be able to safely rescue the remaining KVs from the hands of the Abu Sayaff," said Sobejana.

"Meanwhile, we continue to uphold the no ransom policy with the assurance that we will do our best effort to rescue all KVs, and neutralize all ASG members in order to bring about long and lasting peace and progress in the entire province of Sulu," he added.

Mario J. Mallari

1 pang bihag ng Abu Sayyaf, na-rescue

Malaking tulong sa isinasagawang rescue operations ng militar sa mga bihag ng Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), ang suporta ng mga lokal na opisyal sa Sulu.

Ito ang biringyang-diin kahapen ni Armed Forces of the Philippines-Joint Task Force (AFP-JTF) Sulu commander, Brig. Gen. Cirilio Sobejana.

Inilabas ni Sobejana ang pahayag kasunod ng pagpapalaya sa isang kidnap-victim at pag-rescue naman sa isa pang dinukot kamakailan ng bandidong grupo.

Aniya, nagawang mailigtas ng mga tauhan ng Marine Battalion Landing Team (MBLT)-3 si Blas Jackosalin, Ahmad, taya-Sitio Palar, Barangay Gandasuli, Patikul, sa Sitio Budjang, Bgy. Libog Kabao, Panglima Estero, Sulu, nitong Martes ng hapon.

Kabilang, aniya, si Ahmad sa apat na kataong dinukot ng Abu Sayyaf nitong Abril 29, na kinabibilangan din nina POC Bennie Rose Alvarez at POF Dinah Gumahad.

Kasama ring dinukot ng tatlo si Faizal Abidji, na pinalaya na nitong Mayo 5, sa Sitio Daang Poti, Bgy. Bangkal sa Patikul.

Francis T. Wakefield



Isasabak sa Abu Sayyaf...

11 BASHERS NI ALBAYALDE IPINATAPON SA SULU

NI JOY CANTOS

Labing-isang pulis kabilang ang isang opisyal na bashers sa Facebook ni PNP Chief Director General Oscar Albayalde ang ipinatapon nito kahapon sa Sulu para isabak sa mga bandidong Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).
Magugunita na noong Martes ay lumantad sa Camp Crame ang siyam sa mga bashers ni

Albayalde na kabilang sa 11 na unang batch na ipinatagag ng PNP Chief sa kaniyang tanggapan sa National Headquarters.
Kabilang sa mga ipinatapon ni Albayalde sa halawigan ng Sulu na kilalang baluarte ng mga bandidong Abu Sayyaf Group ay isang may ranggong Senior Inspector.
"Yes. They have been

relieved and reassigned to Sulu because Sulu lacks personnel for the maintenance of peace and security in that area," pahayag ni Albayalde.
Ayon kay Albayalde, ang pagpapatapon niya sa nasabing mga pulis ay upang maiwasan na makampluwensya pa ang mga ito at upang disipli-

nahin ang mga pasaway na parak.
Agad na nilinaw ni Albayalde na ang pagpapatapon niya sa nasabing mga pulis ay hindi bilang pagpaparusa sa mga ito manapa'y upang disiplinahan lamang.
Nabatid na nasa 20 pang pulis ang narukoy na bashers ni Albayalde

sa Bulhay Lespu account sa Facebook na pinagmumura ang naluklok na PNP Chief sa pagsibak nito sa mga pulis na nahuling natutulog sa presinto at mga nag-inumam.
Nakatakda ring ipatagaw ni Albayalde ang susunod na batch ng kaniyang mga bashers sa Camp Crame.

10
INQUIRY
AR

EDITORIAL

Lack of resolve

President Duterte has a standard response to critics who point out that despite the government's deferential stance toward China, it has virtually taken over several reefs and islets within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, blithely putting up massive military bases, and even surface-to-air missile systems (SAMS) on three Philippine reefs—Kagitingan (Fiery Cross), Zamora (Subi) and Panganiban (Mischief).

But those islands and reefs have been there all this time. Mr. Duterte would protest. Why blame him for China's transgressions in unprotected territory when past administrations had failed to do something to protect them, he would add.

He may have a point. Territorial dispute with our Asian neighbors over the Spratly and the Kalayaan islands has vexed past administrations as far back as the '60s, but nothing much had been done to fortify our claim and protect our stakes.

At least not until the Aquino administration filed a case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague questioning China's conflicting claim in the West Philippine Sea. On July 12, 2016, the UN-backed tribunal ruled that China's claim was invalid.

But other than this appeal, the country has lagged behind its neighbors in establishing a strong military presence in the heavily contested waterway that would have discouraged interlopers.

According to the Washington-based Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Vietnam has the most number of outposts in the Spratlys, with at least 49 spread across 27 islands, while Malaysia occupies five islands. Taiwan has one island, and the Philippines, nine.

But the Philippine-held islands are in a sorry state. Pag-asa's 13-kilometer airstrip has become risky for landing big military planes due to its short runway. The runway also becomes too soft for planes to land on whenever it rains, such that pilots have to wait for it to dry for at least three days before they can use it again.

Meanwhile, our outpost in the Spratlys has single-story buildings, storage tanks, solar panels and facilities in need of long overdue major improvements. At Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal, the rusting World War II hospital ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, serves to mark the country's boundary in the Spratlys.

In contrast, most of Vietnam's outposts in the Spratlys have gun emplacements, dish antennas, turbines, artillery, piers, light posts, bunkers and solar panels. Malaysia has built a luxury diving resort next to a naval base on one of its claimed islands. Taiwan's Itu Aba has gun emplacements, a concrete runway and solar panels.

Securing our islands, it seems, is not a priority of this administration. Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano told Filipino reporters in Hong Kong last month: "We'd rather spend our money on education or health ... what good is it to have the best military if your people are starving, if your people don't have jobs ... So our priority really is building our economy and keeping our people safe."

Cayetano may have overlooked reports that Filipino fishermen were being harassed by the Chinese Coast Guard at Bajo de Masinloc, with the vessels closing in on them and cutting loose the anchor of their boats. Intimidated, local fishermen have chosen to fish closer to shore even if that means a leaner catch.

The foreign secretary might have forgotten as well how valuable the West Philippine Sea is, being crisscrossed by vital sea-lanes through which \$5 trillion in global trade passes annually. Meanwhile islets, reefs and atolls in the Spratly archipelago are believed to be sitting atop vast energy reserves. With Chinese vessels closely watching and patrolling the area, are these resources now off-limits to Filipinos?

Speaking of security, Cayetano also seems oblivious to the fact that having SAMS would allow China to throw an air defense network over the islands and a sizeable swath of the West Philippine Sea. Having a sophisticated military base in the area also gives China a vantage point from which to monitor its neighbors and improve its intelligence gathering.

But not to worry, President Duterte has repeatedly assured doubters that China is our friend and has promised to protect us. Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque has his own reassuring words: "... the missiles are not directed at us."

Such naiveté and defeatist attitude over China's bullying tactics do not sit well with the President's critics who describe as "a wasted opportunity" his lack of resolve to press our claim when the favorable arbitral ruling came out. AR

He has blamed past presidents for doing nothing in the face of China's aggressive military buildup. From all indications, history is bound to judge him as harshly

Supreme Court on trial

COMMENTARY

MELBA PADILLA MAGGAY

Of what use are all the codes in the world, if by means of confidential reports, if for trifling reasons, if through anonymous traitors any honest citizen may be exiled or banished without a hearing, without a trial?"

These words of national hero Jose Rizal were said more than a century ago, when this country was under Spain's boot as a colony. But they resonate today, as if they were describing our present justice system.

There is an increasing sense that the law has been rendered pliable, weaponized against those who happen to stand in the way of the President's irascible temper and arbitrary will. The first to fall was Sen. Leila de Lima, falsely linked to drug-dealing. There was not enough evidence for this, but she was nevertheless arrested and continues to be detained.

And now all hell has broken loose on Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno. Palace allies in Congress judged her impeachable without hearing her lawyers' defense. Solicitor General Jose Calida has since filed a quo warranto case against her at the Supreme Court, which if upheld will serve to take her out of office and prevent her from having her day in the Senate impeachment court.

There was a time when the Supreme Court was the last resort for those seeking justice. As guardians of the law, the justices are invested with a kind of mystique and accorded due respect. But as events now unfold, the justices are shown to be not above self-serving collusion in the itch to get rid of a colleague who stepped on too many senior toes by getting named to

her position. Young and female, she was fair game for subtle abuse by those who feel injured by thwarted ambition. Add to this the fact that she has been impolitic, as an insider tells it, refusing to play ball as she went about reforming the judiciary to speed up cases and deliver justice.

Reality tells us that it is not the Chief Justice who is on trial now in the eyes of the public, but the Supreme Court. By merely entertaining the quo warranto, the Court has eroded its credibility as an impartial and independent body.

The quo warranto petition is a brazen violation of the Constitution, which states that the Chief Justice can only be removed through a trial in the Senate acting as an impeachment court. What propels the Supreme Court to assume jurisdiction over this case, in effect abandoning its constitutional duty to uphold the law and safeguard the integrity of the Charter as a legal frame for the conduct of our institutions?

What seems clear is that the Supreme Court is in grave danger of being irreversibly damaged, reduced to a choir singing a chorus of assent to the dictates of a potentate who sees an enemy in anyone who would not bend a knee, to be eliminated by weakened state instrumentalities.

If the justices lend credence to the quo warranto, they effectively put into the

hands of unprincipled legal technicians an insidious weapon that would cow them into submission. It is a sword that will make their heads roll in the event that any one of them stands up to Calida's boss.

What happens, for instance, if someone with enough gumption, like Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio, a critic of Mr. Duterte's policy of accommodation on the South China Sea, ranges with him on his seeming willingness to let China all but claim reefs that belong to the country's exclusive economic zone, as ruled by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague?

Based on this precedent-setting petition, Carpio stands to lose his seat in the Court, and so would every justice who will resist capitulation.

The petition puts the Court on a historic trial. It either stands true to its mandate to defend the Constitution and survives as an independent institution, or it becomes a stamping pad for a naked will to power.

The justices who remain impartial have yet a historic chance to serve as a bulwark against lawlessness and injustice. Let the impeachment proceedings take their lawful course. Dismiss the quo warranto and stand for justice. For without justice, said Saint Augustine a long time ago, the state and its instrumentalities become no more than a band of brigands.

Dr. Melba Padilla Maggay is a social anthropologist and president of Micah Global, an alliance of more than 700 faith-based development organizations working among the poor worldwide.

Cotabato tells its own stories

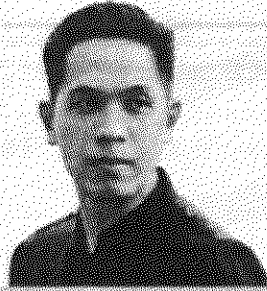
Kidapawan City—Once, there were two brothers, Mamlu and Tabunaway, who lived peacefully in Mindanao. When Sharif Kabungsuwan, the Arab-Malay warrior-missionary, came to preach Islam, Tabunaway converted, but Mamlu decided to hold fast to the beliefs of their elders. The brothers parted ways: Tabunaway to the lowlands and Mamlu to the mountains, but they vowed to honor their kinship, and thus they lived in harmony.

Such is the narrative, animated into a cartoon, which greets the visitors of Museyo Kutawato, Cotabato's newly opened provincial museum which I had the opportunity to visit recently. As an introduction, it makes very clear that this is a museum of and about Cotabato. The history begins not with Magellan, but with the two communities that predate Christianity: the indigenous peoples and the Moros.

The visitor is then led to main exhibit halls which speak of the rich heritage of a once-larger province whose name literally means "stone fort": brass utensils, handwoven textiles, musical instruments, elaborately designed swords. "Maguindanao was an independent harbour principality," one of the sign reads, anticipating that many visitors are unaware of the old glory of a region that was once part of the Maguindanao sultanate.

"The perception is that the Moros are primitive," Antonio Montalvan II, an Inquirer columnist and the museum's curatorial director, tells me. "But the historical record shows otherwise. They were trading with Malacca, India and China. They were even writing letters to European monarchs. Clearly, they had their own sophisticated culture."

The next part of the exhibit moves to the



SECOND OPINION

GIDEON LASCO

more recent—and perhaps thornier—past: firearms of the "priest killer" Norberto Manero, news clippings about deadly tribal wars, and laws that dispossessed the Moros of their land and civil rights. A ballot box is on display, reminding visitors that Moros only gained the right to vote in 1950, well after the rest of the country. All of these painful memories are referred to by a term that carries so much meaning in the region: "historical injustice."

After going through a tour of the museum, I joined sociologist Nicole Curato in a discussion with Moro and IP leaders (the IPs in Cotabato prefer the term over "lunad," which is Cebuano for "native"). The Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) looms large in their thoughts, with the Moros hopeful of its urgent passage.

The IPs are quick to voice support for the BBL—but are worried about its implications for their ancestral domains, which are, even now, subject to land-grabbing and

logging. "If the Moros are oppressed, we are even more so, because we were the original residents of the land," a Menuvu chieftain told me. "And unlike them, we are not organized, we are unarmed, we are powerless."

Still, there is some optimism, at least within Cotabato, where Gov. Emnylou Taliño-Mendoza is seen as a sympathetic leader. "We're not just seen as a flower vase, but listened to as a partner. That is important to us," one of our interlocutors said.

Regarding the museum itself, they, too, are happy—and many residents are pledging to donate their own heirlooms. "This museum is important," an Iranun sultan averred, "because it gives us *halaga* (importance). And that means a lot to us." His words are a reminder that it is not just land or resources that they are fighting for—and that there can be no peace without a restoration of dignity for all the peoples in Mindanao.

As an anthropologist I am always cautious with attempts to (re)imagine the past, much as I want to think of precolonial Philippines as a utopia. I am mindful that neither Christianity nor Western colonialism has a monopoly of oppression. Even so, moving forward, can we not achieve harmony amidst differences; unity amidst diversity; justice alongside forgiveness? The inclusive message of the museum, just like the optimism of the people we met, gives me reason to hope that someday Christians may be seen not as colonizers—but as Mamlu and Tabunaway's lost brothers and sisters.

And that someday we will all be united by a kinship of solidarity, and—inshallah—a future of peace. KL

Comments to gideon.lasco@gmail.com

POSTSCRIPT FEDERICO D. PASCUAL Jr.

Playing solo, Duterte sure to lose to China

THE ALARMING transformation of the West Philippine Sea into a security flashpoint with military outposts bristling with missiles should jolt President Rodrigo Duterte into abandoning the naive notion that he can tackle China by his lonesome.



From the very beginning of his dalliance with Beijing in 2016, under the pretext of striking out on an independent foreign policy, Duterte should have held reservations about his "love" for his counterpart President Xi Jinping and China's abiding "good faith."

Recent developments in what used to be tranquil Philippine seas have shown not only the error of being too trusting and the folly of reducing relations to a game of chance—betting national interests against illusions of winning massive aid, loans and investments.

Events have shown that while the mayor of Davao is cunning enough in local politics, he does not have the deep background and expansive perspective needed by one thrust into the role of architect and spokesman of the country's foreign relations.

With due respect, Duterte's basic blunder is his believing that by himself he could handle the veteran Xi Jinping and the Chinese ambassador in Manila, he with the unsettling grin of a Cheshire Cat.

We've had just two years of Duterte, not yet into the end game of his six-year term but it is clear to a growing number of Filipinos watching nervously that Duterte has been outplayed by the Chinese.

Having been dazzled by promises of easy loans and massive investments to push his ambitious Build! Build! Build! infrastructure program, the Mayor—and the nation—may have to Pay! Pay! Pay very dearly if no rethinking and redoing are done quickly.

On the militarization of the West Philippine Sea, it is clear that the trust and good faith that Duterte had flashed to dampen criticism of his China policy have failed to stop China's illegal occupation and transformation of uninhabitable sea features into its military outposts.

Duterte has assured his alarmed countrymen that Beijing means no harm, that the missiles emplaced on Philippine territory are not aimed at metropolitan Philippines but are meant to defend China against its enemy—which Duterte indelicately identified as the United States!

As he courted Beijing in anticipation of "good behavior" rewards, Duterte explained that he had set aside the Philippines' major legal victory against China at the UNCLOS-based Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague—but that he would invoke it at the right time.

But when is the right time? It now appears that the Mayor, surrounded by fellow politicians and amateurs dabbling in diplomacy, have missed the "right time."

By remaining quiet about that legal victory at The Hague that is recognized by the community of nations, Duterte may have lost on the ground what the Philippines had won at the tribunal.

The interloper is now in control of the maritime areas that the tribunal has declared to have been illegally claimed/occupied at great cost to the ecosystem. What force can now drive an expansionist China from the territory it has grabbed?

We hope the reality is now dawning on Duterte that, playing it alone and only by his Davao ear, he is on the last two minutes of a losing game with the Chinese dragon that is swallowing bits and pieces of a strategic body of water crucial to world security and commerce.

We hope it is not yet too late. But how can the Philippines, a military pygmy under Duterte's hit-and-russ command, restart the one-sided game and cut losses?

* Solving a problem like Digong

PRESIDENT Duterte himself may end up losing heavily. As we have been pointing out since months ago, Duterte should be held to account for his ignoring (violating?) the constitutional ban on foreign bases on Philippine territory (Article XVIII).

The captive Senate is pretending not to have noticed Duterte's making light of its Section 25 that provides that "military bases, foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate and, when the Congress so requires, ratified by a majority of the votes cast by the people in a national referendum held for that purpose, and recognized as a treaty by the other contracting State."

Some of the Chinese bases, complete with military-grade airstrips, intermediate-range and surface-to-air missile systems, and reinforced shelters have been built on Philippine territory in violation of the Constitution that President Duterte is sworn to "preserve and defend."

The moral, political and legal implications are staggering. What to do?

By his doing nothing to question and protest the militarization of WPS features that the arbitral tribunal had ruled to be within Philippine exclusive economic zone and illegally built up by China, Duterte may have violated the ban.

There is talk of possible impeachment, a political game of numbers. But with both chambers of the Congress under the thumb of a President claiming support of a large number of bots, trolls and voters, such a constitutional recourse may not prosper.

There are rumblings in the foreign office that it may be time to review Duterte's solo performance and to replace (with a multilateral rules-based approach) his kowtowing to China's strategy of resolving territorial disputes by direct bilateral negotiation.

Rallying similarly situated neighbors with territorial conflicts with China and calling on the support of civilized countries favoring the rule of law sound great.

But how can the Manila government shift to a multilateral track when an introverted Duterte has antagonized old friends and cursed their leaders as he pivoted to the left toward Beijing since the start of his term?

Maybe some of the time-tested allies are still willing to gloss over the Duterte-sque insults—if only to buy time till the shelf life of the Philippine strongman expires.

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We hope it will not be too late

THE Paracel islands are located in the northern part of the South China Sea (SCS) close to China's Hainan Island and Vietnam. To the east is the Philippine island of Luzon. Some years ago, China deployed surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles on Woody Island in the Paracels after building it up from the sea, constructed runways, and turned it into a military base.

Last week, China also installed missiles on three islands much farther south in the Spratly group of islands, between Cambodia and Palawan. The three – Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs – are also claimed by the Philippines. They are among several reefs that China built into islands in 2015, complete with airfields.

The missiles would allow China to strike surface vessels within 545 kilometers of the reefs, as well as to target aircraft, drones, and cruise missiles within 300 kilometers. China's Defense Ministry was quick to declare that the moves "were not directed at any country" and that they served to "ensure regional peace and stability." They were installed, it said, as "the natural right of a sovereign nation."

China's claim of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea clashes with the claims of several other nations to some islands and reefs close to their shores, including the Philippines, Vietnam,

Malaysia, and Brunei. China has sought to allay the fears of these and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by offering a Code of Conduct in the SCS, but it has been years since this was proposed and there is no agreement to this day.

The Philippines, during the administration of President Benigno S. Aquino III, won a decision in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The court rejected China's claim of historical rights to the South China Sea with all its resources. But President Duterte chose a policy of cooperation with China as the alternative, he said, would be war which we cannot win. He has thus embarked on a program of economic cooperation, including joint exploration for oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea.

Last week, however, Duterte said he will have to assert the Philippines' victory in the international court in The Hague before his term ends in 2020. "I cannot let my administration pass without really insisting, because I am doing it for my country," he said at the 37th Philippine Principals Training Development Program and National Development Board Conference in Davao City on Friday.

We welcome this declaration from the President. We hope, however, that when his term ends – four years from now – and he takes the promised action, it will not be too late. Q

The Highway Patrol's 63rd anniversary



DUTY CALLS
FLORENCIO FIANZA

THE Philippine National Police Traffic Management Group celebrated its 63rd founding anniversary yesterday in Camp Crame. The TMG is one of the oldest operational national support units of the PNP. It was created due to the fatal vehicular accident of two congressmen in what is now the MacArthur highway on Nov. 4, 1954.

Upon its activation, the Traffic Control Group as it was originally known, was placed under the then Philippine Constabulary. The original duties of the Trafcon was the enforcement of traffic safety laws, general supervision of local police forces with regards to the enforcement of traffic laws, assistance to the Bureau of Land Transportation (now the LTO), the enforcement of driver's licenses and motor vehicle registration and regulations with regards public carriers.

These duties have evolved over time. The original unit was composed of

12 officers and 41 enlisted personnel with 12 jeeps all coming from the 10th Battalion Combat Team of the Philippine Army. Within three years, however, the unit expanded to eight traffic districts nationwide with 32 new units of Ford Fairlane sedans. As the unit expanded, its reputation grew. The Trafcon was tasked to assist in various national events like the management of traffic during the 10th Boys Scout World Jamboree in Mt. Makiling, Laguna. In 1960, the motorcycle unit was organized with the now famous boots,

tan brown belt and crash helmets with sun glasses which the public have grown accustomed to. This function of the TMG of escorting and managing traffic during big international events such as the Asean summit,

“ Today the unit is 1,700-strong and scattered all over the country. ”

APEC and ADB conferences continue to this day.

Today, the unit is about 1,700 strong, scattered all over the country. It is headed by Chief Superintendent Arnel B. Escobal, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy. The duties of the TMG have also increased over the years. Yes, it still issues

14 Turn to A5

The Highway...

From A4

clearances when one sells a car, change paint or engine but does not do some of the old duties like supervising local police traffic units. Its relationship both the Land Transportation Office and Land Transportation Franchising Regulations Board are also no longer the same.

In Metro Manila, the Highway Patrol are only visible along Edsa, helping in the management of traffic. Its attention is now more focused on going after stolen vehicles or car napping as is more popularly known here. During the time of Mar Roxas as Secretary of Interior and Local Governments, some of the functions of the TMG were curtailed. This is perhaps the reason why TMG personnel are no longer everywhere along national highways. It was wrong of him to have than so because there is a lot of things that the TMG can do to help improve traffic conditions along our national highways.

Throughout its 63 years history, the unit has had its ups and downs. Although the ups have been many, there were a few downs like when it was involved in the now infamous Kuratong

Baleleng case involving many high-ranking PNP officers. It must be said, however, that the participation of the TMG in this sordid officer was that it was the unit that initially stumbled on the plan of the dreaded gang. As we now know, the case was taken over by other PNP units until it developed the way it did. Hopefully, the TMG can continue to preserve its good traditions and adjust to the changing times but not to forget its primary mission of making our national highways safe for all our motoring public.

Last Sunday, President Duterte was quoted by one major daily as saying that China promised to defend the country from external threats. If one scans the current geopolitical horizon, it would be hard to identify a country that poses as a threat to the country. Japan, our old WW2, adversary is now our biggest source of aid. It could not be the United States because it's a treaty ally. It cannot be Australia, Taiwan or our Asean neighbor either. The only country as far as I know that could be a threat to the country is China. This is what I have thought ever since I joined the military service.

We have always been protected by the South China Sea. Now China is at

our very door step with missiles in the reclaimed islands. They can reach us in a matter of minutes. I do understand that strategic priorities do change and perhaps China is now a friend as our President is saying but I have a hard time understanding the logic as to how China has now become a cherished friend. Since the President is the repository of all intelligence, he must know something that we do not know.

If this is the case, then the President should at least tell the nation. We are entitled to an explanation. There must be a more important reason other than the Chinese's willingness to provide arms free of charge. Because if it is the only reason, the Chinese certainly got the better of us in the exchange.

With all the things that China has done, our government has remained quiet. The main reason is that we cannot win a war with China. No one in his right mind is advocating that the country goes to war with China. But there are other tools that can be used to assert our rights and protest unacceptable behavior. It is called diplomacy and does not require the country to go to war. If we continue to keep quiet due to "hija" because of what China is giving us, then we are certainly on our way to becoming a Chinese province.