

US senator apologizes to GMA for 'Afghanistan' tag on RP

Brownback takes it back.

President Arroyo said US Sen. Sam Brownback apologized to her for making the statement that the Philippines is the next target, after Afghanistan, of the US-led international anti-terrorism campaign.

The statement, which he made in connection with the anti-terrorism training conducted by American troopers in Basilan, greatly alarmed the Filipino public.

Mrs. Arroyo told Palace reporters that she impressed upon Brownback that his statements were not helping the Philippines or the US government in the efforts to rescue the American couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, his constituents from Kansas, who are still being held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan.

The President said she was able to talk with Brownback on Saturday through arrangements

By **MARICHU VILLANUEVA**

made by the US Embassy.

She disclosed that she also talked long distance on Saturday with US President George W. Bush who informed her that he could not join her in New York for the World Economic Forum to be held on Jan. 30.

The President said that she explained to Brownback how his statements will not only make it more difficult to rescue his constituents but will also delay the acquisition of new equipment, new assistance, and additional intelligence for the Balikatan exercises.

"And therefore that delays the implementation of the training. So I said his statements were counter-productive to his purpose," she admonished Brownback.

"He's quite apologetic. 'You know,' I told him, 'we have to be very clear about this. From the beginning I told President Bush that the term of reference is training. And that the American soldiers will not engage in combat. I think if

you're going to make clarifications, you (Brownback) must keep stressing that,' I told him."

The President earlier refuted Brownback's statements, saying that the Philippines had been fighting local Abu Sayyaf bandits long before the US launched its anti-terrorist attacks in Afghanistan to flush out the al-Qaeda network which is believed to be supporting the terrorist activities of Muslim groups in Mindanao.

She said she decided to announce the holding of the Balikatan exercises earlier than planned. She wanted the observation period to start Jan. 15 and then announce it in a proposed joint statement with President Bush in New York on Jan. 30 when she embarks on her second working visit to the US.

"(It would be) two weeks after the fact," she said, "and I said it's more transparent to announce it before Jan. 15."

Mrs. Arroyo did not elaborate on her phone conversation with Bush on Saturday. "He called me up the other night and he said he's not gonna be in New York. So if ever, we'll just talk to each

other on the phone, which we do anyway even if I'm here," she said laughing.

Mrs. Arroyo pointed out that the military equipment being brought here by the US for the Balikatan is "in addition" to the \$100 million worth of anti-terrorism assistance contained in the joint communiqué that she and Bush issued at the end of their talks at the White House in September last year.

"Actually, a lot of what they'll be bringing in Balikatan will be additional - in addition to the \$100 million, although a lot of it is part of it," she said. That includes, she added, the training of two light reaction companies.

Mrs. Arroyo earlier reaffirmed her full trust and confidence in the capability of the Armed Forces to annihilate the Abu Sayyaf on its own without waiting for reinforcements from American troopers.

She recalled having stressed this point to Bush at the White House in September. "When Bush asked me, 'Do you want our soldiers to fight with you?' I replied, 'No, because my soldiers are very good. All that my sol-

diers need is equipment and training.' And that is what Bush gave us."

The President said it will be a welcome bonus if the rescue of

the Burnham couple happens in the course of this year's conduct of the Balikatan military exercises in Basilan and Zamboanga City.



President Arroyo meets with kidnap victim Jacky Rowena Tiu yesterday at Malacañang. Tiu was kidnapped late last year in San Fernando City, La Union by Chinese nationals allegedly from the mainland whose release from detention was allegedly demanded by the Chinese embassy.

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