

# GMA: Basilan free from Sayyaf

By PERSEUS ECHEMINADA and PAOLO ROMERO

LAMITAN, Basilan - With soldiers closing in on remnants of the Abu Sayyaf group, President Arroyo in an unprecedented move hoisted the Philippine flag here yesterday to lead nationwide rites for the 104th Independence Day celebration and to symbolically reclaim the area from the grip of the group linked to al-Qaeda terrorists.

Skipping the traditional flag-raising ceremony in Kawit, Cavite, a stern-looking Mrs. Arroyo raised the national flag at the Lamitan

municipal hall that remains pockmarked from last year's gun battles.

The President, clad in a maroon suit with a Yakan-inspired scarf, was joined by senior defense and military officials and a crowd of 600 during the 7 a.m. ceremony held about 200 meters from St. Peter's Church where nurse Edibora Yap's body lay in a coffin.

Several US soldiers, training and advising Filipino troops, were also on hand. It was the first time that a

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president had presided over Independence Day rites in the southern Philippines.

Soldiers, police and presidential guards though easily outnumbered residents who were present at the flag raising, ABS-CBN television said.

In Manila later in the day, the President paid tribute to Yap by calling her a "leading patriot of our time." Mrs. Arroyo said she was equally proud of the soldiers, who have not seen their families because of their posting in Mindanao to fight rebel groups.

Yap, together with American missionary Martin Burnham, was killed in last Friday's bid to free her, Martin, and his wife Gracia from the Abu Sayyaf bandits who had been holding them for more than one year. Gracia was rescued but wounded.

During last year's Independence Day rites, Abu Sayyaf bandits presented Mrs. Arroyo with what group leader Abu Sabaya called a "gift" - the head of hostage Guillermo Sobero, of Corona, California, one of the 20 abducted on May 27, 2001 from the Dos Palmas beach resort in Palawan.

The Burnhams were among the hostages brought to Basilan from Palawan. On June 2, 2001, the Abu Sayyaf rebels raided Dr. Jose Ma. Torres Memorial Hospital and seized four hospital personnel, including Yap, to provide medical help for their wounded members.

Mrs. Arroyo did not talk to reporters in Lamitan where she spent the night to attend Yap's wake at the Hardin de Infancia Hall of the Saint Peter's Church and to raise the flag here. She was immediate-

ly flown out by military helicopters.

"Basilan has been a spawning ground of terrorism. This is symbolic of the government's efforts to free the island from terror and poverty," acting Press Secretary Silvestre Afable told *Reuters*.

Snipers in black suits watched from the town hall's roof, and officers said that soldiers were deployed in a five-kilometer radius, ready to fend off a surprise attack on the Basilan island town. Two armored personnel carriers were posted in downtown Lamitan.

Assisting the President were Basilan Gov. Wahab Akbar, Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes, Armed Forces chief Gen. Roy Cimatu, Social Welfare Secretary Corazon Soliman and Presidential Adviser for Mindanao Jesus Dureza.

After the flag raising, the oath of allegiance was recited. Then, the President approached local government officials, employees, and residents and shook their hands.

Akbar said the people of Lamitan and Basilan feel "honored" and "very happy" that the President chose to raise the flag here for this year's Independence Day rites.

Akbar said the President's presence had boosted the morale of Lamitan residents, who for years have been living under the threats of Abu Sayyaf. "Everyone is happy for holding the Independence Day flag raising here. She wants to show that Basilan is really at peace," he told the *Agence France Presse*.

Mrs. Arroyo visited Basilan's capital of Isabela on June 1 where she extended financial assistance to fire victims.

US Army Maj. Timothy Todo-

ra, who together with five US soldiers attended the Lamitan flag-raising ceremonies, said they were pleased to be invited. Todora said he hopes that peace and normalcy would return to Basilan before the joint military exercise under the current Balikatan ends July 31.

US Army Sgt. John Maccjunas said he would like to see an "improvement" in Basilan's security so that residents "can pursue their dreams such as sending their children to school without any fear of violence."

Akbar said the Abu Sayyaf force has been significantly reduced amid the continuing joint US-Philippine military operations in Basilan, Jolo, and in Zamboanga peninsula.

As a carload of US soldiers passed by in Lamitan, village leader Edilberto Gomez, 69, reflected on the irony of US troops being in town during Independence Day. He said it did not bother them.

"We are free. The Americans are here building roads and digging deep wells," Gomez said. "They are not invading. They are helping us."

Housewife Linda Collado, 46, with three children, said she is fed up with the fighting, but sees no end to it yet.

"If it can be done, I hope the rebels will be pulverized," she said. "The problem is that they are still around. We do not know where."

Army Lt. Col. Daniel Lucero acknowledged that more work must be done to restore normalcy. "We still have to achieve the psychological security among the people here. We're trying to free the people from fear." — **With Roel Pareño, AP, AFP, Reuters**