

# GMA calls off military's search for Sabaya's body

President Arroyo said yesterday she has called off the massive Marine and Navy search for the remains of Abu Sabaya after watching a US spy plane footage of the clash in which the Abu Sayyaf spokesman is believed to have been killed.

The President also renewed her directive to capture other top leaders of the Abu Sayyaf group, notably Khadafy Janjalani.

Digressing from her prepared speech before the Third National Grand Breakfast of the Brotherhood of Christian Businessmen and Professionals at a Makati City hotel, Mrs. Arroyo said the military should now focus its might and resources to arrest senior Abu Sayyaf leaders, including Ghalib Andang, alias Commander Robot, Abu Sulaiman, Isnilon Hapilon and Hamsi Raji Sali.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes told THE STAR that the military is now pursuing remnants of the bandit group believed to be hiding in Sulu.

Mrs. Arroyo's instruction to end the Sulu Sea search came on the heels of a statement Tuesday by Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Ernesto Carolina that Navy and Marine commandos will continue combing the Sulu Sea until they find Sabaya's remains.

Also on Tuesday, Carolina

said government troops in Mindanao are now in a full-scale offensive to get Janjalani and other leaders of the bandit group.

Four patrol boats, one ship, one Navy helicopter, two Air Force helicopters, six boats of the Philippine Army, specifically the Riverine Battalion, and one company of Marines have been deployed in the Sulu Sea search.

Sabaya, whose real name is Aldam Tilao, was fatally wounded and after falling into the sea, subsequently believed to have drowned following the June 21 clash with government soldiers in Mantibu Point off Sibucuo town in Zamboanga del Norte.

The President said the Philippines will not mind if the US soldiers participating in the Balikatan military exercise in Mindanao will lend their high-tech equipment to assist a small contingent of the Philippine Navy in retrieving Sabaya's remains.

Mrs. Arroyo said she has ordered Reyes that "the bulk of our forces there should not go to finding the dead leaders but to find the remaining live leaders of the Abu Sayyaf."

A P50,000-reward offered by her government should be enough to allow authorities to hand over the task of finding Sabaya's remains to local fishermen, she said.

The President gave to military "asset" "Gardo Ibrahim" on

By **MARICHU VILLANUEVA**

Tuesday a P5-million check as a reward for providing information that led to the June 21 gun-battle wherein Sabaya was slain.

Ibrahim was one of the two military informants who was reportedly with Sabaya and his followers.

Mrs. Arroyo hosted a luncheon meeting at Malacañang for senior officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

After the luncheon, Reyes told THE STAR that the President told him "to concentrate and devote the (AFP) resources" to seize the Abu Sayyaf leaders.

"We are convinced that Abu Sabaya is dead and our efforts are better utilized searching for the remaining bandits," Reyes said. He also said that government forces are trying to recover three Indonesians kidnapped in Mindanao.

Reyes said in jest that Sabaya is "conversing with the fish already" and alluded to Francis Ford Coppola's film "The Godfather" where a Mafia boss gave a fish wrapped in a newspaper to send a message that a mobster had been killed.

The President said she told Reyes on Tuesday evening of her decision to call off the Sabaya search.

Meanwhile, in a television interview yesterday, former Abu Sayyaf hostage Buddy Recio said he does not believe that Sabaya

has been killed until his body is produced. He said the government may be rushing to conclude Sabaya's death and that this would give "a false sense of security."

## Hunt down Osama?

If despite their high-tech equipment the US military cannot find terrorist Osama bin Laden believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, maybe Philippine troops can do the job for them, the President said.

Mrs. Arroyo made the pitch for Philippine troops yesterday and reiterated praises for their latest success in the campaign to crush local terrorists. Under the current Balikatan, US forces are training and advising local troops in their anti-terrorist campaign.

The President cited in particular the success of Operation Black Archer that neutralized Sabaya, whose group is linked to Bin Laden's international terror network, the al-Qaeda.

Mrs. Arroyo said the Philippine troops are now "joking" and "so happy" after the success of the operations against Sabaya. "Now we know why Osama bin Laden has not been found even if they are using that technology. They have no Filipino soldiers on the ground."

The President declassified military information on the June 21

clash, saying that she is narrating details of the operation to squash skepticism over Sabaya's death.

"The American spy planes showed it all because they recorded it and I saw the movie," apparently referring to unmanned surveillance aircraft equipped with detection cameras, which US forces deployed in Mindanao to help locate the Abu Sayyaf bandits.

"I can't show you the movie because we cannot expose details of the technological capabilities of the Americans," she said.

The President revealed that the two informants who had tipped off the military on Sabaya's escape plans wore special necklaces which flashed when viewed through night vision goggles so they would not be shot by government forces during the night-time gunbattle.

"They were given a necklace which flashed when our soldiers would turn on their krypton flashlights in their night-vision equipment," Mrs. Arroyo said, explaining how the two informants survived.

She said lights flashed from the necklaces which the informants wore on their chests and the pair then dived into the water as the fighting began.

It was "perfect technology, perfect planning, perfect execution," the President said.

Meanwhile, a man claiming to be a "political officer" of the Abu Sayyaf called up journalists at Camp Aguinaldo and said Sabaya is still alive in Basilan and will soon surface to disprove claims that he was killed June 21.

Defense Department spokesman Melchor Rosales said the "downsizing of recovery efforts is being undertaken to enable the AFP to shift its personnel and material to other areas where the remaining leaders of the Abu Sayyaf group and their followers are believed to be hiding."

The caller, who identified himself as Abu Hamid, said Sabaya was not involved in the encounter as claimed by authorities.

He said Sabaya may surface next week once he finds a way to escape from surveillance equipment that could trace satellite phone calls.

The man claimed the June 21 clash was "staged" by the military elements who want to get the credit for killing Sabaya and divide the reward.

He even claimed that Sabaya and his men were to release Martin and Gracia Burnham and Edibora Yap in exchange for a P10-million ransom facilitated by former Ilocos Sur Gov. Luis Singson. However, the military "sabotaged" the release, he said. - With reports from Paolo Romero, AFP, AP, Reuters