

'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'

By MARICHU VILLANUEVA

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Taking a tougher stance against organized crime, particularly kidnapping, which has been holding back the country's economic development, President Arroyo said yesterday she would invoke this Catholic teaching of retribution for crimes committed against the people.

The President issued the stern warning during a visit to Camp Crame where she graced an anti-crime workshop wherein 21 kidnapping syndicates were identified.

Mrs. Arroyo said Philippine National Police (PNP) chief Director General Hermogenes Ebdane will submit to her a shopping list of the things needed for an effective implementation of an all-out anti-crime drive.

"General Ebdane will give me his report today on what he needs to accelerate the manhunt for those syndicates at the top of the order of battle," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She vowed to personally monitor the campaign to be spearheaded by a new elite unit called Police Anti-Crime Emergency Response (PACER) to be headed by Ebdane himself.

The President stressed that the principle of harsh retribution could be applied to heinous crimes which are punishable by death under Philippine laws.

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An eye for an eye

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Junking an appeal by the influential Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), Mrs. Arroyo lifted a moratorium on the execution of prisoners convicted of heinous crimes.

At least three death row inmates are lined up for the death chamber for execution through lethal injection.

"So if the death penalty is needed, perhaps, at least for the first one, two, or three executions would be the eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth of my administration," the President said.

Mrs. Arroyo's hard-line stance against heinous crimes came on the heels of opposition by human rights groups to her plan to enlist the help of pistol-packing Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte as her special adviser on anti-kidnapping.

Duterte has reportedly battled for a relaxation of the law to allow extra-judicial executions of suspected criminals.

The President clarified, however, that Duterte did not say he would implement

summary executions as an effective deterrent to the commission of crimes. "What he said was that he respects human rights and the law," Mrs. Arroyo said.

Duterte was recently featured in TIME magazine as a maverick mayor riding a Harley Davidson while running after criminal elements in his town.

Mrs. Arroyo stressed that judicial executions were a better option to salvaging and the formation of vigilantes which may result in widespread violation of human rights.

She lamented that despite government efforts to stamp out criminality, crime gangs continue to ply their nefarious trades with impunity.

The President outlined her administration's determination to apply the full force of the law on criminal syndicates in her remarks at the presentation of the Philippine Human Development Index Report held at Malacañang.

"On the peace and order campaign, I

am dealing with the threat of kidnapping the way I dealt with the threat of the Abu Sayyaf. I nag the police everyday the way I nagged the military everyday since last May 1 after I was convinced that we have seen the last of the destabilization threats," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"Because May 1st was very peaceful, I began to work on breathing down the necks of the military, and thank God, the Abu Sayyaf has been defeated," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She was referring to a threat by forces loyal to her predecessor, deposed President Joseph Estrada, to stage widespread protest moves to destabilize her leadership.

Estrada belittled the formation of PACER which replaced the National Anti-Crime Commission and the National Anti-Kidnapping Task Force by calling the new unit as "the same dog with a new collar."

Estrada expressed doubts that PACER would be able to rein in kidnapping and other violent crimes.

The former president warned that kidnappings-for-ransom will persist as long as there are police officers involved

in organized crimes.

"Political will and correct priorities are the key to solving the problem of kidnapping. Changing the name of an anti-kidnapping unit will not solve the problem," he said.

He also said it was not surprising violent crimes have increased under the Arroyo administration because the police and the military intelligence community were more preoccupied with demolishing the political opposition.

He cited the case of opposition Sen. Panfilo Lacson, a strong contender in the 2004 presidential polls who has been at the receiving end of a vicious black propaganda campaign by pro-Arroyo forces.

"I can proudly say that one of my greatest legacies was that I was able to stop kidnappings, bank robberies, as well as drug trafficking during my first year as Chief Executive. This I was able to do through the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Task Force which proved its worth despite attempts to discredit the accomplishments by Arroyo's propagandists," Estrada said.

— With Jose Rodol Clapano