

GMA: Death for smugglers

By MARICHU VILLANUEVA

Smugglers will be confronted "crime by crime... criminal by criminal." And they will be charged with economic sabotage, a non-bailable offense punishable by death.

President Arroyo vowed yesterday to get tough on smuggling, directing Customs Commissioner Antonio Bernardo to present an "order of battle" against suspected big-time smugglers.

The President revealed her directives to Bernardo a day after she presided over an anti-smuggling summit on Tuesday at the Philippine Ports Authority building at Manila's South Harbor. Among those who attended the summit were Transportation and Communications Secretary Leandro Mendoza and Bernardo.

The President said she clearly ordered Customs authorities to arrest and file criminal charges in court against smugglers and to confiscate smuggled goods.

"They (smugglers) will be charged not only with smuggling but with economic sabotage," she said. "This means that it (smuggling) will be a crime that is punishable by death, and it also means that there will be no bail recommended when they are apprehended."

Meanwhile, Mendoza ordered a tight watch on all private ports nationwide fol-

lowing reports that several of them are being used as drop-off points for smuggled goods.

"We have initially identified critical spots that are being used by smugglers as landing points for smuggled goods. But these critical spots will not yet be made public so as not to telegraph our moves," he said.

Bernardo said the anti-smuggling summit enabled government agencies to clearly define their functions, which hopefully will make them more efficient. The meeting was attended by 15 different agencies, including the military, police, National Food Authority, Sugar Regulatory Commission, Maritime Industry Authority and the Coast Guard.

Yesterday's presidential announcement on the "order of battle" against smugglers

Turn to Page 4

GMA: Death for

From Page 1

was made as she digressed from the prepared text of her address to the joint Central Visayas Regional Development Council (RDC) and the Regional Peace and Order Council (RPOC) in Bohol.

Mrs. Arroyo said she would like the renewed anti-smuggling campaign undertaken with the same vigor as the campaign against kidnap-for-ransom syndicates led by Director General Hermogenes Ebdane Jr., chief of the Philippine National Police.

Ebdane has publicized names of 21 kidnap-for-ransom syndicates on top of the order of battle listed by police, she said.

The President noted as valid complaints by the local business sector about rampant smuggling and kidnapping, citing them as among the major peace and order problems in the country that impair the business and economic climate.

She said these concerns were aired again by the influential Makati Business Club in releasing results of its latest survey among member-companies and corporations.

"We do mean to address the problem of peace and order and 82 percent of the Makati Business Club (members) said that. In fact... even before they said (so), I have already said that we will be working on this," she said.

The high frequency of smuggling was among the reasons cited by the Customs bureau as a major source of revenue leakage that contributed to its failure to meet tax collection targets.

"backdoor" channels that undesirable aliens are able to enter the country.

Mendoza ordered the Coast Guard and the Philippine Ports Authority to strictly monitor the arrival and departure of seagoing vessels and subject them to rigid inspection to stop smuggling at the ports.

During the anti-smuggling meeting, among issues discussed were the modus operandi and the identification of people involved in smuggling and that government personnel assisting smugglers must be also identified.

Bernardo said the President was most concern about the smuggling of rice because of its impact on farmers. He said rice seized in 2000 totaled 16,000 sacks but surged in January 2001, reaching 1.2 million sacks.

"You could interpret it in two ways, the higher volume of seizure could mean that it is worse now or they were there before, but were simply not seized," Bernardo said.

Asked to comment on reports linking him to alleged smuggling of luxury vehicles at Subic Bay Freeport, presidential son Pampanga Vice Gov. Juan Miguel Arroyo called the suggestion "malicious."

The Pampanga vice governor was linked by a report to Gerard Rabonza, a son of former Presidential Security Group chief Brig. Gen. Glenn Rabonza, whose company was named by certain unidentified Subic Bay Freeport sources as having smuggled luxury vehicles declared as "used trucks."

"I do not deny he's an associate of mine. But whether he did anything illegal, it's not something for me to comment on. Let the law deal with him," he said.

At the opposition front, Rep. Gilbert Remulla (LDP, Cavite) said Mrs. Arroyo should not resort to name-calling to hide the failures of her government, notably in combating official corruption.

Remulla said, "By and large, our people are not satisfied with what the administration is doing to fight poverty, corruption, cronyism and ineffective governance. That is the reason why civil society groups are complaining."

Remulla suggested that instead of raising the communist bogey, Mrs. Arroyo and her officials should provide the country with honest and transparent governance.

"If the administration practices such kind of leadership, the people including the political opposition, won't deny it the support it needs," he said. — With reports from Sheila Crisostomo, Jess Diaz, Jose Aravilla