

# GMA pardons elderly, commutes 13 sentences

President Arroyo has granted absolute pardon to an elderly woman and commutation of sentences to 13 individuals, Malabon-based newspaper today.

Granted absolute pardon for reason of old age was Sonia Tomalia. Her pardon was recommended by the Department of Justice (DOJ) through the Board of Par-

dons and Pardon.

The 13 granted commutation of sentences were Emmanuel Alagon, Guillermo Abaniera, Segundo Abaniera, Roque Casayag, Rolando Espirita, Arturo Fernandez, Norwin Chero, Oscar Quijona, Virgilio Rosales, Jesus Saing, Juanita Sotero, Edwin Suello and Conrado Vakkopala.

Under Philippine law, only the President has the power to grant pardon or commute sentences of prisoners.

The recommendation by the DOJ to the President to pardon prisoners or shorten their jail terms is based on several considerations such as old age, health, time served, and good behavior.

- Marvin By

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rebuilding hundreds of houses destroyed and damaged during the conflict," he said.

Around 16,000 people have fled their farmlands in North Cotabato and adjoining areas since last weekend to escape a three-day military offensive aimed at MILF rebels holed up in the area.

Military operations ended on Wednesday and the Army is trying to contain the backlash, exerted by armed vehicles and troops.

Segovia said an extra battalion of soldiers would be deployed to help with the relief effort and to reassure frightened refugees that they were safe.

"The next task would be to help civilian agencies in handling the displaced people," Segovia said.

Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral said they are providing immediate relief assistance while conducting stress debriefing and therapy sessions to families affected by the fighting.

Cabral, who made a visit in the province to check the conditions of affected families, said "the area is generally peaceful."

Cabral said out of the 37,219 families (86,095 individuals) displaced by the armed conflict, only 4,879 families (24,379 individuals) opted to stay in 49 evacuation centers.

About 12,007 families chose to stay at their friends' and relatives' houses, she said.

Most of the evacuees came from the 58 barangays in the towns of Aloran, Pikit, Misamis, Litbangon, Tukuran, and Pighawan that have been occupied by the MILF rebels.

"The needs and concerns of the affected families, such as food, water and a safe place to stay had been promptly addressed," Cabral said.

A trickle of families was heading back to their farmlands but many are still too frightened to return.

World Food Programme country director Stephen Anderson said his field staff reported about 16,000 families were too afraid to go home despite the retreat.

"It is putting a strain on them to remain in this type of situation, but at the same time, people are fearful of their lives," Anderson said.

WFP has provided 400 tons of rice to those who fled their villages.

"We don't think it is a humanitarian crisis yet," Anderson said.

The Red Cross on Thursday said it would send food rations to up to 60,000 people displaced in southern Philippines by conflict between Muslim insurgents and armed forces.

"The KRC and the Philippines Red Cross are loading trucks in Cotabato City to distribute food rations, beginning August 15, for up to 60,000 displaced people," it said in a statement.

Water and sanitation kits for 10,000 people were also expected to arrive in Cotabato City yesterday.

Citing figures supplied by the authorities, the International Committee of the Red Cross said some 130,000 people have fled the conflict sparked by the Supreme Court's decision to suspend plans of an extended Muslim homeland in Mindanao.

North Cotabato Gov. Juan Saelatan said donor groups and the government were helping the displaced families.

"We have enough rice for the evacuees that could last for at least a week," Saelatan said.

An estimated 160,000 civilians fled fighting that

erupted last week after the MILF guerrillas, led by renegade commander Urduja Kato, refused to leave the villages in North Cotabato despite a four-year-old ceasefire between the government and MILF.

Fighting began over the weekend and intensified Monday, when artillery and helicopter gunships pounded insurgent-occupied areas. The rebels were on the run by Tuesday, leaving behind burned and looted villages, bushy tops and land mines.

Officials said the provincial government would provide money for people to rebuild their homes and for the families of its armed civilian volunteers who were slain resisting the rebels.

The government has said the clashes would not disrupt the ongoing peace process with the MILF.

The government launched its attack on the MILF after accusing the rebels of occupying the villages in North Cotabato. Some six civilians were killed in the fighting while 49 rebels and five

soldiers died, according to the military.

As this developed, suspected MILF rebels attacked a power relay tower in Barangay Tacupan in Carmen town late Wednesday.

Provincial police director Senior Superintendent Lester Camba said the rebels have used bombs lobbed out from mortar shells to damage the transmission tower to fill, causing power outages in some parts of Central Mindanao.

Camba said the bombers attached four other explosive devices in other towns but which malfunctioned. - AFP, Reuters, John Uvinos, Helen Flores