

GMA orders massive relief operations in conflict areas

President Arroyo ordered yesterday agencies to undertake massive relief operations in communities in Mindanao caught in conflict between government troops and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza said Mrs. Arroyo directed Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral and Health Secretary Francisco Duque to personally oversee the "intervention measures," particularly in Lanao del Norte.

She also ordered National Disaster Coordinating Council head Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro "to trigger the release of funds for relief and rehabilitation of affected families and other victims."

"The Department of Education and the Department of Public Works and Highways were also directed to inspect, assess, and take action to rebuild destroyed structures," Dureza said.

"The President also thanked non-government organizations, especially the Philippine National Red Cross for extending humanitarian assistance and appealed to them to continue providing humanitarian support to affected residents," he said.

He added that the ongoing relief effort in North Cotabato, the scene of recent fighting between government troops and MILF guerrillas, would receive more aid if required.

The Cabinet was expected to discuss last night the total amount of the relief and rehabilitation package for the conflict-hit areas in Mindanao.

Mrs. Arroyo will also convene on Friday the expanded Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council to tackle the Mindanao situation and come up with steps to end the renewed conflict.

Dureza said while there are moves to review the peace negotiations with the MILF, the Arroyo administration would do its best to salvage the talks.

"We have not changed our policy. In Mindanao there is no other option but peace," he said.

"When we say peace process, peace process covers a wide area, it is not only just peace talks. It cover inculcating the culture of peace, development in the area, capacitating the institutions, so it covers a wide area of work when we say the peace process has primacy in Mindanao," he said.

Enough supply of goods

Cabral said there is enough supply of relief goods for evacuees in war-stricken provinces for at least two weeks.

"We have enough relief goods in North Cotabato for two weeks, assuming that the number of evacuees there does not increase," she said in a phone interview.

She added that local government units (LGUs) in North Cotabato have established 50 evacuation centers to accommodate some 4,000 families displaced by the ongoing armed conflict in the region.

Should the number of affected families rise, Cabral said LGUs in Region 12 have already released standby funds to meet their needs.

Aside from providing immediate relief assistance, social workers from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) have been conducting stress debriefing and play therapy sessions to the evacuees since last week.

She said day care sessions were also being held in the evacuation centers.

Earlier, Cabral said the United Nations' World Food Program pledged some 400 metric tons of rice for the displaced families.

The rice donation worth \$308,144 is expected to benefit 96,000 North Cotabato residents.

Although relief supplies are still sufficient to meet the needs of evacuees, the DSWD secretary appealed for more support from local and foreign donors.

The DSWD and the Philippine Marine Corps (PMC) last week signed a memorandum of agreement to ensure faster delivery of basic needs to war-torn provinces in Mindanao.

'Greater efforts' needed

Red Cross chairman and Sen. Richard Gordon appealed yesterday that "greater efforts" be exerted to keep civilians out of harm's way as gun battles between government troops and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continue to escalate.

"Around 7,000 people have been displaced. Even before this most recent rash of armed conflict, there were already over 150,000 who have fled their homes in Cotabato and a great number of them had to camp by the roadsides because evacuation sites could no longer accommodate them," he said.

Records at the Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC) showed that 76 barangays from the towns of Linamon, Kauswagan and Kolambugan in Lanao del Norte, among others, have already been affected by ongoing hostilities.

"If it is peace we are truly after, we cannot hope for it to come about as long as fear, desperation, and poverty reign," noted Gordon as he urged local government leaders to ensure the safety of civilians.

The PNRC-Iligan Chapter dispatched volunteers to assist the evacuees. It had also made arrangements to withdraw rice from National Food Authority warehouses for relief operation.

He added that PNRC officials and staff are prepared to mobilize personnel and give aid to those displaced by the conflict.

Gordon said the "law must be enforced severely" among those that attacked the civilian communities.

"I want to be careful about this. We must go after those terrorists... but don't make one of the whole thing," he claimed.

He added that those responsible for the attacks are "war criminals" and should be made to pay for their crimes.

'Donate pork barrel funds'

Speaker Prospero Nograles, who is in Singapore attending the 29th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Association assembly, yesterday called on his fellow Mindanao lawmakers to use their pork barrel funds in providing relief to victims of MILF atrocities.

He designated Cagayan de Oro Rep. Rufus Rodriguez, who belongs to the House opposition bloc, to "personally assess the situation on the ground and find out the extent of relief efforts that is needed to help the refugees."

"If we can raise P100,000 as contribution from each Mindanao congressman, I think that this will go a long way to help

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the refugees," Nograles said in a statement released by his office in Manila.

At the same time, the Speaker said the MILF leadership should show a "sign of good faith by arresting the leaders of the MILF elements that attacked Lanao del Norte and surrender them to government authorities."

"Their rogue comrades should be penalized.

"If it is true that the MILF leadership did not issue the order to attack, the MILF elements that pillaged some villages in Lanao del Norte should be pursued by the MILF in coordination with government security forces. They should not allow their rogue members from destroying our gains in the peace process," he said.

Nograles said that in claiming that the MILF leadership did not issue any order to attack, this is also an admission that they are not in control over the commanders of their field units. It also shows that the MILF has a serious leadership problem.

"I'm beginning to doubt if we are conducting peace talks with the right people. This defiance to the directives of their hierarchy is a sign that those who are behind the attacks have gone rogue and are no longer part of the MILF's chain-of-command. It shows sign of weak leadership if the MILF leaders cannot act to discipline their own members."

Duque placed yesterday two hospitals in Ozamis City and Cagayan de Oro City on Code Red to ensure adequate medical attention for victims of escalating hostilities in Lanao del Norte.

Duque said all medical staff in Northern Mindanao Medical Center in Cagayan de Oro and Mayor Hilarion Ramiro Regional Training and Teaching Hospital in Ozamis City must be on stand-by for 24 hours to attend to patients. — With Helen Flores, Sheila Crisostomo, Delon Porcilla