

GMA: No all-out war against MILF

By PAOLO ROMERO

increased after the rebels fought back against the military offensive in their stronghold near the Liguasan marsh in the province.

Rico said the offensive was intense in barangays Pansul and Guindulungan that left the rebels no choice but to retreat further.

Local officials in Maguindanao added the rebels took the heavy toll from aircraft bombing and strafing of MILF positions near the town of Datu Piang, as the rebels fought back with mortar fire.

Provincial officials claimed many of the rebel casualties were teenagers who were recruited by the MILF as part of its "expeditionary force."

The military said the aerial bombings were to prevent the rebels from approaching the villages and take some hostages to use them as human shields.

Mrs. Arroyo slammed the MILF for the treacherous attacks in North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte and expressed doubts on the rebel group's sincerity in the peace talks.

Mrs. Arroyo hit the MILF leadership's inability to control some of its commanders that led to the attacks that resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians and scores getting killed and wounded.

Ermita said the President is appealing to the MILF to unite its forces.

"We are not setting any condition. We are just appealing to the leadership of the MILF to unite and stop the atrocities being committed by their recalcitrant commanders," he said.

Authorities have filed criminal charges against MILF commanders Umbera Kato and Abdullah Macapaar alias Commander Bravo, who respectively led the attacks in North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte and Sarangani that left scores of people killed and thousands of civilians displaced.

"For our country and as a sign of goodwill, it will be good if they can surrender the two commanders. But if that is not realistic for them to surrender, the MILF leadership should at least tell them not to undertake any further trouble or violent ac-

tions," Ermita said.

Ermita clarified Mrs. Arroyo's statement was taken out of context when she asked for the disarmament and demobilization of all armed groups fighting government during a speech last Thursday.

Mrs. Arroyo had said the government would no longer pursue talks with armed groups and instead shift the talks with communities.

"Our engagements with all armed groups shall be about disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation or DDR. From negotiations, our focus shall shift to dialogues with the communities or government conducting authentic conversations or dialogue with the people," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"You just got it at the wrong context because this is a work in progress. She was only referring to the final phase of the negotiations when she mentioned DDR," he said.

Ermita said "the President wishes to stress that the peace process, as defined along one of its main principles, is not defined nor determined by armed groups alone, but by all communities and sectors concerned."

While security forces are complying with the President's orders to get Kato and Macapaar, Ermita said the main objective is to secure the safety of civilians and restore peace and order in the conflict areas.

Ermita said Mrs. Arroyo just wanted to emphasize, "armed rebellion does not have a place in our democracy."

"Our peace process will make sure that our government will push for a national total rejection of armed struggle as a means to achieve political and societal change," he said.

With the ongoing offensive, the military said the MILF rebels are now getting desperate in their dire situation, forcing them to resort to guerrilla tactics, according to Rico.

Rico said the rebels waylaid a convoy of troops who were escorting relief and medical supplies to evacuation centers in Guindulungan in Liguasan marshland late Thursday. -With James Mananghaya, Roel Pareño, John Unson, Edith Regalado, Perseus Echeminada, Ramil Bajo, AFP