

Give Teehankee a new lease on life, critics told

By DELON PORCALLA

Administration lawmakers called on critics of pardoned convicted murderer Claudio Teehankee Jr. to give him a new lease on life, citing the case of two former convicts who even managed to resume their political careers.

Zamboanga del Sur Rep. Antonio Cerilles cited Quezon City Rep. Vincent "Bingbong" Crisologo and former Calococan congressman Luis "Baby" Asistio, who were both granted pardon by the late President Ferdinand Marcos.

Cerilles said the likes of Crisologo, who was

convicted for arson, and Asistio, who was convicted for kidnapping, are "good examples that former inmates can lead a new life."

The law provides that inmates with good behavior are qualified for clemency.

Another administration stalwart, Isabela Rep. Rodito Albano, said the clemency petition of Teehankee filed several years ago proves that there was basis for his pardon, contrary to claims of critics.

"As Justice Secretary (Raul) Gonzalez said, the Hultmans knew about the petition because it was contained in the settlement they signed with the Teehankees in 1999, where they accepted payment for civil damages," he stressed.

"With this issue clarified in the vital document provided by Secretary Gonzalez, it's time the President's critics stop hitting her decision to grant Teehankee executive clemency," the lawmaker said.

"Critics should stop being too judgmental. They should give him a chance to lead a new life. To err is human, to forgive divine," said Albano, a member of the House contin-

gent to the Commission on Appointments.

Legal experts in the House of Representatives, including a member of the opposition bloc, said President Arroyo merely exercised special powers granted her by the Constitution when she granted the pardon.

House Deputy Speaker for Mindanao and Maguindanao Rep. Simeon Datumanong said the President has "discretionary prerogative" to grant executive clemency to all convicts.

"Granting pardon is part of the privilege of President Arroyo, although sometimes she relies on the recommendations of the Board of Pardons and Parole," Datumanong, a former justice secretary, said.

"There will be agitation. Let them petition it but let us make clear that it is the prerogative of the President under the Constitution," he said.

Opposition Rep. Rufus Rodriguez of Cagayan de Oro City agreed with Datumanong.

Cavite Rep. Elpidio Barzaga, a former criminal defense lawyer and human rights advocate, said Teehankee deserves a chance at reform.

"For me, the fact that Claudio Teehankee Jr. has been convicted and was incarcerated for 14 years is already sufficient penalty for the crime

which he has committed," Barzaga said, noting that Teehankee was only the latest of more than 200 convicts granted executive clemency this year for good behavior.

"Let it be emphasized that the purpose of penalty is not only punitive but also reformatory. Hence, in this life the purpose of penalty has been satisfied and executive clemency would be proper. After all, as practicing Christians, we do not seek vengeance and we also forgive those who sinned against us," Barzaga said.

Business execs up in arms

However, the executive clemency did not sit well with Makati City's business leaders as they accused the Arroyo government of betraying the rights of the victims of heinous crime.

"Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita is correct in saying that the power to commute sentences and grant pardons is a presidential prerogative enshrined in the Constitution," the Makati Business Club (MBC) said in a statement.

"However, in resorting to this argument to parry widespread criticism of the executive clemency granted (to Teehankee), the government betrayed a disturbing lack of respect for the victims' rights and the public's right to information," the group noted. — Michael Punongbayan, Marvin Sy