

# GMA orders increase in livelihood assistance to ex-NPA rebels

By PAOLO ROMERO and JAMES MANANGHAYA

President Arroyo has ordered an increase in livelihood assistance extended to former New People's Army (NPA) rebels, to include P50,000 for every M-16 rifle turned over by a rebel returnee, Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Secretary Hermogenes Esperon said yesterday.

Esperon, a former Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief, said the government previously offered P18,000 in exchange for an M-16 rifle, but Mrs. Arroyo has raised it to P50,000 to entice the remaining

5,000-strong NPA guerillas to return to the fold of the law with their firearms and live a normal life.

He said the amount is in addition to the P20,000 immediate cash assistance an NPA rebel returnee would get on top of the P50,000 livelihood assistance to be extended by the government.

That means a rebel returnee stands to receive at least P120,000 if he or she surrenders an M-16 to authorities, Esperon said.

The amount is more than enough for a former rebel to start his or her own small business, he said.

Last week, 26 former NPA rebels in Bacolod City received P20,000 each, representing the government's immediate cash assistance, in a simple ceremony held at the Negros Occidental Provincial Capitol. Esperon distributed the money.

"This is part of the Social Integration Program (SIP) implemented by the government to reintegrate former rebels into the mainstream of society pursuant to Administrative Order No. 172 issued by President Arroyo on March 23, 2007," he said.

"It involves a process whereby communist rebels who have returned to the fold of the law are provided a set of interventions to facilitate their integration into society," Esperon added.

## Campaign booster

The Armed Forces of the Philippines, on the other hand, welcomed the government's plan and said it would greatly boost the campaign against the Communist insurgency.

"It would encourage more fighters to lay down their arms and rejoin mainstream society," Lt. Col. Ernesto Torres, AFP pub-

lic affairs office chief, said.

He added the move would increase the chances of more surrenders, which would greatly affect the manpower strength of the rebel group.

"Increasing the incentive can in-

crease the chances of having more rebels turning in their firearms. Coupled with the rebels' sincere desire to return to the fold of the law, give up armed struggle and start living a normal and peaceful life, the move may hasten the defeat of insurgency in our country," he said.

The AFP has successfully cut down the number of NPA guerillas from a high of 26,800 in 1986 to a low of about 5,000 at the end of June 2008.

Statistics show that the AFP is hoping to dismantle 23 more guerilla

fronts all over the country during the second half of the year.

The NPA has been waging a guerilla insurgency for almost four decades now, making it the longest running in

Southeast Asia which has claimed the lives of over 40,000 people.

The President vowed to significantly degrade the military capability of the communist rebels by 2010.