

# GMA to DOJ execs, drug prosecutors: Go on leave

President Arroyo ordered yesterday Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez to put on leave all officials and prosecutors at the Department of Justice (DOJ) alleged to have received bribes in connection with a high-profile drug case involving rich and influential families.

Mrs. Arroyo's order appeared to indicate that she is leaning towards the version of officials of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) over the DOJ's that justice officials and prosecutors allegedly received bribes in exchange for the release of suspected drug

dealers from wealthy families. Gonzalez said he would implement the order, but would still have to clear with the President if Justice Undersecretary Ricardo Blancafor is included among those to go on leave. Blancafor was earlier questioned by PDEA officials for showing "undue interest in the case."

Gonzalez has not yet — at least publicly — finished his investigation into the controver-

By PAOLO ROMERO

sial drug-bribery whose suspects are the so-called "Alabang Boys."

"No one should be spared," Mrs. Arroyo said in a statement from Cebu where she is staying until today. "The full force of the government's power to act against those that betray public trust should be applied swiftly and unequivocally."

"More so in this case, which involves illegal drugs — society's cancer on the one hand, and supposed pillars of the justice system on the other," she said.

PDEA officials questioned Blancafor and some prosecutors who recommended the dismissal of the drug charges against Richard Brodett, Jorge Joseph, and Joseph Tecson or the Alabang Boys.

PDEA officials alleged they have received bribes as much as P50 million

for the release of the suspects.

Mrs. Arroyo said: "We should not allow a breach in our determined war against the menace of illegal drugs and against narco-politics on a broader level."

"We are witness to the tragedy that befell countries that have taken a pause on their war on illegal drugs," the President said.

She said the nation's war on drugs should be vigilant and unrelenting and should not be compromised.

"From a personal realm, I state this, I am a mother who is bothered by an alleged conspiracy to let loose on our streets anew pushers of illegal drugs. What if they lurk on my street?" Mrs. Arroyo said.

She said illegal drugs do not just destroy lives, "they gnaw at the core foundation of a nation's most precious asset—its young people."

"Illegal drugs sap the strength of its young victims, their vitality, their joy and their enthusiasms," the President said.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza and Cabinet Secretary Silvestre Bello III said the campaign against illegal drugs would be one of the main agenda of the Cabinet meeting at the Palace tomorrow.

"Maybe we can get to the root of this controversy," Bello told The STAR.

Prosecutors said they would wear white armbands today to denounce accusations hurled against them by PDEA, while PDEA officials declared that they would wear white armbands to show their "unblemished image."

## 10 more drug cases pending

Meanwhile, a PDEA official said there are about 10 big drug-related cases still pending at the DOJ that came in before the case of the so-called "Alabang Boys."

"What was so special with the case against the three rich drug trafficking suspects that it was decided upon faster than the others," PDEA spokesman Derrick Arnold Carreon told The STAR in an interview yesterday.

"Compared to the others, *paraing ang bilis* (the resolution of the Alabang case seemed faster)," Carreon said.

"Was it because, someone prominent was following up on the Alabang case?" he asked, as he referred to the admission of Blancafor that he made calls to PDEA's Maj. Ferdinand Marcelino on the status of the case of the Alabang Boys.

He said the pending requests include seeking the opinion of the DOJ and resolution of cases, among others. "One of which dated as far back as April 2008. These are the ones older than the Alabang case," the PDEA spokesman noted.

The Alabang case was only in September and it was dismissed and decided upon earlier than the others," he said.

Carreon also expressed concern about the remaining pending cases following the rift between DOJ and PDEA. It is anticorruption agency caused by allegations of bribery in the dismissal of the case against the Alabang Boys arrested in a buy-bust operation last March 14.

"We hope that the issue won't get personal... How are we going to perform our functions in the fight against illegal drugs if that will be the case," he said.

He was referring to the threat of the DOJ's task force on illegal drugs to resign en masse, following the bribery allegations linked with the dismissal of the case of the Alabang Boys.

It was only Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez who averted the plan of the prosecutors, led by Chief State Prosecutor Jovenito Zuño, by telling them to stand their ground and see the controversy through.

But Carreon said: "Don't they realize that we were also hurt by what happened... We never meant to attack anyone personally... If the DOJ prosecutors will take it personally, the (drug) cases won't push through... We appeal to them. Let's continue our job."

In another development, Carreon clarified allegations that it was PDEA's fault that the case against Manuel "Manny" Lim, a son of Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim, was dismissed by a Manila court because its agents did not show up at the hearings.

The younger Lim was arrested by PDEA agents in a buy-bust operation last March 14 in Sta. Cruz, Manila, during which 100 grams of shabu worth P60,000 were seized from him and two other suspects.

Carreon said five PDEA agents were recently dismissed after being tagged in irregularities in another drug case.

"Two or three of these dismissed agents were involved in the Lim case," he said.

He added that while the dismissed agents were tagged in irregularities in another buy-bust operation, "it is presumed that they performed without irregularity as far as the Lim case is concerned."

"The defense used the agents' dismissal to question their appearance in court and their moral ascendancy."

Carreon said the subpoenas were sent to those who acted as back up in the buy-bust operation, instead of the one who acted as the pesser buyer.

"As for the pesser buyer, the supposed subpoena came in only through a telephone call or a text message. It was not in writing, which was highly irregular," he said.

He added the agent who acted as the pesser buyer in the Lim case still "signified his intention to appear" but was questioned by the camp of the defense.

He added that the dismissed agents might have been intimidated to go against a high-profile drug trafficking suspect — With Reinir Padua, Mike Frialde