

# House panel asks GMA to bust 26 drug syndicates

Now that she has designated herself anti-drug czar, President Arroyo should crack down on the country's 26 big-time drug syndicates.

Members of the House committee on dangerous drugs made the suggestion yesterday as they discussed possible remedial legislation to help concerned agencies in the campaign against illegal drugs.

"The President should bust wide open the remaining 26 big drug syndicates operating in the country with impunity. She should lead the arrest and prosecution of these merchants of death," Cebu City Rep. Antonio Cuenco, committee vice chairman, said.

He said it was the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) that identified the drug gangs.

"There were originally 32 syndicates in their order of battle, but they have already dismantled six groups," he said.

Asked to identify the syndicates, Cuenco said he could not remember them but added that one gang, which he called the Lim group, is operating in Cebu and other parts of Central Visayas.

The PDEA list was submitted to Ilocos Norte Rep. Roque Ablan Jr., chairman of the dangerous drugs committee, but Ablan told reporters he could not release it because it was closed to his panel during a glassed-door hearing.

Cuenco also identified the provinces of Misamis Occidental and Lanao del Sur as "major sources" of illegal drugs.

"This is a fact known to law enforcers, particularly local police forces. I don't know why they are doing nothing about it," he said.

As for remedial legislation,

Cuenco filed a bill shortly after yesterday's meeting increasing the penalties for judges, prosecutors and law enforcers who bungle illegal drug cases.

Under the Revised Penal Code, a judge rendering an unjust decision faces imprisonment of six years to 12 years. Cuenco proposed that it be increased to 20 years.

Under his bill, prosecutors and law enforcers mishandling drug cases would face imprisonment of up to 12 years, instead of six years as provided under the same code.

The Ablan committee noted that many of the cases filed against drug suspects have been dropped due to the non-appearance in court of arresting lawmen and prosecutors.

Cuenco said with the President as drug czar, "we will score more victories in the fight against the drug menace, which has become a national security problem."

Opposition Rep. Roslo Gomez of Parañaque said Mrs. Arroyo was right in taking over the lead role in the anti-illegal drug campaign.

"With the tension between the PDEA and the Department of Justice, they might not cooperate with each other in the campaign. At least the President can order them to get their act together. Anyway, this is temporary until the tension subsides," he said.

Isabela Rep. Rodolfo Albano III, an administration ally, lashed back at Mrs. Arroyo's critics who found fault in her decision to assume the role of anti-drug czar.

"If the President wanted to be the anti-drug czar so she can personally oversee the fight against illegal drugs, that's her

prerogative. She's the President of the Republic and the Commander-in-Chief. She's the one who will ultimately be blamed if the country becomes another Colombia," he said.

## On target

But big-time drug syndicates indeed are in the crosshairs of President Arroyo's anti-narcotics war, Malacanan said.

"The drive will go against anyone involved, whoever they may be, they have to be made accountable before the law," Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said.

"It goes without saying law enforcement agencies must come up with specific actions with known big-time traffickers. The President wants immediate identification of those in the campaign and bring them to the bar of justice," Ermita said.

He also defended random drug testing on students, saying the Supreme Court has upheld its constitutionality.

"A random drug testing for students is not only acceptable but necessary, for the safety of the people and the legitimate concern of government should be protected," Ermita said.

He also said the Palace is open to proposals that mandatory drug testing be done to public officials. "I'm not averse to it," Ermita said.

## Possible replacement

Gomez also suggested that the President consider appointing Taguig City Prosecutor Archimedes Manabat as new head of the DOJ anti-drug prosecution task force.

"I do not know him, but based on the list of 24 high-profile drug convictions submit-

By JESS DIAZ

ted to us by the DOJ, Prosecutor Manabat's name figures prominently. Of the 24, he prosecuted 12 cases leading to the conviction of the suspects. He must be a good prosecutor," he said.

On orders of the President, the head of the task force, Senior State Prosecutor Philip Kimpo, is on forced leave, along with Chief State Prosecutor Jovencito Zuño, State Prosecutor Misael Ladaga, and State Prosecutor John Resado.

The four were directed to go on leave in connection with the Alabang boys' case, which Resado investigated.

Resado had recommended that the non-bailable charges the PDEA filed against suspected drug pushers Richard Brodett, Jorge Joseph and Joseph Tecson be dismissed and that the suspects be freed.

Zuño, Kimpo and Ladaga, who reviewed the Resado report for Zuño, approved the recommendation.

## DOJ 'fixers'

Gomez also urged Ombudsman Mercedesita Gutierrez to investigate fixers in the DOJ.

He said news reports claim a certain Atty. Alex Tan and a Mike Muslim routinely fix drug cases in the department.

Sources in the Ablan committee told The STAR that DOJ Secretary Raul Gonzalez personally knows the two alleged fixers.

The fixers reportedly escort and spend for certain high-ranking DOJ officials whenever they travel abroad, one source said.

## Less red tape

The PDEA said Mrs. Arroyo's involvement would "cut the red tape" in the gov-

ernment's campaign against illegal drugs.

"Our functions will still continue because our structure under Republic Act 9165 has (always) been (under) the Office of the President," PDEA spokesman Derrick Arnold Carreon said.

"(However), it cuts the red tape. Because it would mean she (Mrs. Arroyo) will focus on the anti-drug campaign," he told The STAR.

In Daguigan City, Region 1 police director Chief Superintendent Luizo Ticman said that with Mrs. Arroyo's new role "we should put our acts together against illegal drugs."

Carreon said the President's move would facilitate coordination among agencies under the Dangerous Drugs Board.

"It facilitates action for other government agencies which are members of the DDB," he said.

Carreon cited PDEA chief Director General Dionisio Santiago's lament that with his equivalent rank of senior undersecretary, he could not give orders to chiefs of other agencies under the DDB.

"He's dealing with (people with the rank of) secretary at the DDB. How will he order or direct them to act? We can only request," Carreon said.

"With PGMA stepping into the picture, she can direct other government agencies and their heads to expedite all requests from PDEA," he said.

## Not a snub

Meanwhile, Maj. Ferdinand Marcelino yesterday belied reports quoting the National Bureau of Investigation that he continued to ignore invitations to shed light on the alleged bribery of DOJ and PDEA offi-

cials.

Marcelino is the head of PDEA's Special Enforcement Service that conducted the buy-bust and follow-up operations in September that led to the arrest of Brodett, Joseph and Tecson.

"Marcelino lamented that the recent articles published in several dailies berated and prejudged him as blatantly ignoring summons from NBI investigators. The articles painted a wrong picture that PDEA is uncooperative, thus running counter to the pronouncement made by PDEA Director General/Senior Undersecretary Santiago that PDEA will fully cooperate with investigators," the agency said in a statement.

The PDEA said it sent an official communication on Jan. 6 to the office of NBI Director Nestor Mantaring, informing him that the subpoena for Marcelino was received only at 3 p.m. on Jan. 5 and that the PDEA official could not appear due to an ongoing operation against another drug suspect.

When the NBI Special Task Force issued another subpoena on Jan. 9, Marcelino was at the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces reporting to chief of staff Gen. Alexander Yano.

"NBI investigators led by Atty. Dulce M. Ricalfort instead went to the PDEA National Office at around 1 p.m. to obtain the statement of Major Marcelino. It was also agreed upon during this meeting that other related documents will be submitted by Major Marcelino on January 14, 2009," the PDEA said. - With Paolo Romero, Reinir Padua, Helen Flores and Eva Visperas