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Resolving The Sulu Hostage Crisis

MANILA, April 07 (PinoyGlobal) - The nearly three-month hostage situation in Sulu, involving workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) abducted by the Abu Sayyaf Group, has spun a parallel drama starred in by the government crisis team on one side and Sen. Richard Gordon on the other, both with differing views on how best to successfully end it.

The government team is composed of the Local Crisis Committee led by Sulu Governor Abdusakur Tan and other local Sulu officials, backed by the Armed Forces and the National Police, in coordination with Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. and Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno.

Gordon is chairman of the Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC), thus his special interest in securing the safe release of the two remaining ICRC hostages, Swiss national Andreas Notter and Italian national Eugenio Vagni. The third hostage, Filipina Mary Jean Lacaba was released last week.

The Abu Sayyaf is demanding an extensive troop withdrawal from Sulu in exchange for the release of the remaining hostages, which Malacanang has flatly rejected as it would compromise the peace and order situation in the entire province and even outlying areas. (The Al Qaeda-linked



group had earlier demanded a troop withdrawal from certain areas in Sulu, and the military twice agreed to a modified withdrawal in exchange for the promised release of one hostage, but the Abu Sayyaf failed to deliver each time.)

Gordon, who has been criticized for negotiating with Abu Sayyaf leader Albader Parad without coordinating with the government team, supports a troop pullout and said President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo would be held responsible if the hostages are beheaded by their abductors.

It was a statement that prompted Teodoro to break his long-held silence on Gordon's criticism of government efforts to secure the release of the hostages. The defense chief said that it there is anyone to be blamed for whatever fate may befall the hostages, it

should be the Abu Sayyaf who kidnapped the ICRC workers in the first place.

He asked the senator to refrain from allegedly meddling in the hostage crisis, especially as “the senator’s statements only serve to strengthen the hand of kidnappers.”

“The military pullout demanded by the Abu Sayyaf is a criminal attempt to allow them to wreak havoc elsewhere. There should be a stop to these destructive attempts at interfering with the crisis management committee’s work,” he said.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde echoed Teodoro’s statement, saying it is unfair for Gordon to hold Mrs. Arroyo responsible for anything that may happen to the hostages since it is the Abu Sayyaf that had created the problem and not the Chief Executive. Remonde also reiterated that the government, while bent on saving the lives of the two hostages, is also guided by its adherence to rule of law and protecting national sovereignty.

“I would just like to reiterate the President’s directive to the Local Crisis Committee, with the solid backing of both the AFP and the PNP, to do everything possible to secure the release of the hostages without compromising national sovereignty,” Remonde said.

Presidential Management Staff Head Hermogenes Esperon Jr., former Armed Forces Chief of Staff, said it would be unwise to submit to the demands of the Abu Sayyaf. He said that relenting to the demanded complete troop withdrawal would only “compromise our Republic”. He believes that ongoing operations against the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu, would deter future

kidnappings.

“If you give in now, they will kidnap even more. Look at what happened in Basilan. We took the hard position so Basilan was cleared. However, things relaxed a little bit so there were a lot of negotiations starting from small kidnappings, hostaging, payments were made and this emboldened (the Abu Sayyaf) so it became a problem,” he said.

Esperon also supports the state of emergency declared in Sulu on March 31 when the Abu Sayyaf again reneged on its promise to free one of the hostages, even after the military implemented a limited troop withdrawal.

Esperon recalled that it was the same strategy undertaken by the government in resolving the infamous Dos Palmas abductions carried out by the terrorist group in 2001, which dealt a blow to the group’s kidnapping activities for a number of years.

“I recall that in Basilan before, we declared a state of emergency to go after the kidnappers. After we declared that we apprehended many people. I faced 102 counts of illegal detention but at least after that for so many years Basilan was cleaned up,” said Esperon, who was brigade commander in the island province at the time.

He added that in his experience, in dealing with terrorists, “you certainly have to show your strong hand also.”

“As a former brigade commander who operated against the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan and who later on became the CS who directed the operations against the Khaddafy Janjalani and his group in Jolo, I must say we must never pull out from Jolo or part thereof. That is part of making the rule of law supreme in

this land,” Esperon said.

He added that giving in the the Abu Sayyaf would only lead to “bigger problems.”

“The Abu Sayyaf are not groups that we should extend friendship to. They should be dealt with with the rule of law and with firmness....This is not to say we are disregarding the hostages but what we should think more of now is on the prevention of this from happening again,” Esperon said.

In an interview with reporters, Remonde said that by making such a claim, Gordon is only encouraging Abu Sayyaf to make unreasonable demands to the government.

“Statements that the safety of the hostages are in the hands of the President are very unfair. We should not forget that the ones responsible for this are the bandits who kidnap and take people hostage. For anybody to say that it’s the fault of the President and the government is far from the truth,” Remonde said.

He added: “We should not absolve the misguided elements of the ASG because by saying that, we encourage other terrorists and bad elements to do that and then they want the government to kneel before them. And the moment that government doesn’t do that, then it is the government’s fault? What kind of logic is that?”

He reiterated that the government continues to trust the “very responsible and very responsive local crisis management committee with the very active and full support of the Armed Forces and the PNP” to deal with the hostage crisis and hoped others would do the same.

“The Governor and officials of Sulu definitely know the situation in Sulu better

than any armchair expert based here in Manila....Of course, everybody’s help is welcome but we should not go solo; we should coordinate everything with the local crisis management committee. I think that’s the most responsible thing to do,” Remonde said.

He stressed that in sensitive situations such as the Sulu hostage crisis, “it would be best to avoid politicking, trying to gather brownie points because that will not help the cause of freedom and justice.” Remonde was apparently taking a swipe at Gordon, a known presidential aspirant.

“It can only help the cause of terrorists who just want attention,” Remonde said.

He said he believes Gordon “is acting and speaking on the basis of the best of intentions and motivations...as a senator of the Republic and head of the Red Cross, but as we say, oftentimes the road to perdition is filled with good intentions.”

“So even if we have good intentions let’s be more circumspect if we are helping or not,” he said.

In a radio interview, Gordon maintained that he is not meddling in government decisions and agreed that concerned government officials should move in the same direction in resolving the hostage crisis.

“We must act as a team. Let’s decide together, let’s study together, let’s get all the facts together, including the views of the military and the Cabinet and let’s have a meeting,” he said.

He said he only spoke with the Abu Sayyaf as he had been requested to do so by the ICRC and it was the terrorist group that initiated talks with him and not the other way

around.

“I have a personal and institutional responsibility to do everything I can to secure the safe return of the hostages....At this point, talk is a lifeline in this extremely dangerous situation. This is not a location shoot for a movie. There is no ‘Take two’ if things do not turn out right,” he said.

Gordon, who wants a wider military pullout as demanded by the Abu Sayyaf, also warned that if the hostages are harmed, “the loss could be even greater for our nation. Mark my word.

But Tan, who heads the crisis committee, believes that the Abu Sayyaf freed Lacaba on April 2 because of the pressure of the implementation of the state of emergency” and not because of the limited pullout implemented by the military, which the Abu Sayyaf had scoffed at as it fell short of their demand.

The release was made as we were putting in more troops into the area and sealing off, cordoning the area where they are suspected

to be,” Tan said.

Lacaba’s release was supposed to have proven the efficacy of the government’s policy against the terrorist group. Mrs. Arroyo said the development is a “confirmation that we should always stand behind our policy of dealing firmly with any form of lawless behavior.”

Whether that firm policy would also free the two other hostage remains to be seen. Other questions come to mind: Will Gordon finally relent to criticism and coordinate his actions with the government’s crisis committee? Who will be proven right in the end?

The drama continues.