

Bangit to Aquino: AFP failed to end rebellion

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FORT DEL PILAR, BAGUIO CITY—Outgoing Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief of staff Gen. Delfin Bangit is leaving a transition report for incoming President Benigno Aquino III that admits the military's failure to meet the deadline for wiping out communist insurgency in the country.

President Macapagal-Arroyo had imposed a June 2010 deadline, which coincides with the end of her term, for the end of the 40-year guerilla war.

But AFP spokesperson Lt. Col. Arnulfo Burgos Jr. said Bangit's report mentioned that the military had significantly reduced the scope of the communist New People's Army operations and whittled down its number of fighters.

"We did not beat the deadline [but] the insurgency has been confined to only five places—Samar, [the] Negros provinces, Compostela Valley, Davao and Bicol," Burgos told the Inquirer here on Saturday.

AFP proud of accomplishment

He also said military operations had cut the strength of the NPA from 25,000 to 5,000 fighters.

The AFP, under Bangit's leadership, could be proud of this accomplishment, he added.

Bangit's report will be part of the military's briefing materials for Aquino, who takes over on June 30.

Aquino had not spoken to Bangit directly or through an emissary before the AFP chief of staff announced his retirement, effective on Tuesday, a year earlier than officially scheduled, Burgos said.

Earlier, the President-elect announced that he would replace Bangit, who was named chief of staff by outgoing President Macapagal-Arroyo two days before the constitutional ban on appointments took effect in March.

Top AFP officials accompanied Bangit to the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) here on Saturday where the outgoing chief was given a testimonial parade.

The parade was given on the same day 325 plebes (freshman cadets) belonging to the PMA "Siklab Diwa" Class of 2014 became part of the cadet corps.

Bangit, a member of PMA "Makatarungan" Class of 1978, which had adopted Ms Arroyo as an honorary member, told the cadets he would leave the service fully confident he had fulfilled his duty "without lying, stealing or cheating."

New approach needed

Meanwhile, a senior military official said the AFP must "rethink" its militarist approach if it also hopes to end a new insurgency—Abu Sayyaf's terror campaign under the banner of radical Islam.

Brig. Gen. Francisco Cruz, the AFP's Civil Relations Services chief, said the government needs to come up with an "ideological response" to the problem.

The absence of an ideological element is the “glaring weakness” in the government’s antiterrorism program, he said.

“(The) war on terror is a war of ideas and therefore, the strategy to defeat Abu Sayyaf and radical Islam...requires an ideological counterforce,” Cruz said in an e-mailed statement.

Cruz described the Abu Sayyaf as a “politico-religious terrorist group” as shown by its previous attacks, including the bloody Valentine’s Day bombings in 2006.

“(W)hat keeps the Abu Sayyaf and other Muslim extremist forces alive in this country is radical Islam or the waging of jihad (religious war),” he said.

Lawless activities

These observations were contained in his paper titled “Defeating Abu Sayyaf: The Strong and Urgent Need for an Ideological Response,” which he presented at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

According to Cruz, Abu Sayyaf’s use of “radical Islam” to justify their lawless activities had been very effective in recruiting members and gaining financial support from foreign Islamic groups such as the Jemaah Islamiyah and the al-Qaida network of Osama bin Laden.

Along with other state agencies, he said, the Armed Forces must devise proactive policies to end the perceived bias and mistrust between Muslims and Christians, and promote a culture of peace and nonviolence at the community level.

By doing this, the government would “destroy the enemy spirit and promote moderation,” he said.

He criticized the government’s National Plan to Address Terrorism and its Consequences for its failure to recognize “terrorist motivation and mind set.”

Crafted by the Anti-Terrorism Task Force, Cruz argued that the program did not present a holistic approach to counterterrorism “as it focuses only on operational counterterrorism targeting terrorist cells and attack plans.”

“A military-based response is not enough to destroy the Abu Sayyaf and other Muslim extremist groups in the country,” he said, adding: “It would need a comprehensive approach to confront an enemy whose roots have political, social, economic and psychological dimensions.” With a report from Marlon Ramos