

Arroyo defends Iraq pullout

S. B. Arroyo
Philippines

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By P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE, JULY 21. The President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, has said she does "not regret" her decision to pull out the military contingent from Iraq to secure the release of a compatriot, Angelo de la Cruz, from captivity at the hands of a terrorist group.

On confirmation that Mr. de la Cruz was freed in Baghdad on Tuesday, Ms. Arroyo said in Manila that it was her responsibility to ensure the safety of the Filipinos wherever they might be.

The 51-strong military contingent had been sent there to perform "humanitarian" tasks.

The hostage-takers wanted the contingent out of Iraq if the life of Mr. de la Cruz, a civilian, were to be spared.

The U.S. Embassy in Manila said Washington was 'glad' to hear about the release. Con-

demning the targeting of innocent civilians, it said its "thoughts and prayers" were with him, his family and the Philippines throughout the period of his captivity.

However, East Asian diplomats and analysts were quick to note that the U.S. had actually expressed 'disappointment' over Manila's move. While the U.S. saw this as an aspect of a 'rotational' anti-terror coalition in Iraq, the diplomatic 'take' is that Manila has now fallen out of step with its neighbours, Seoul and Tokyo, which have vowed to keep their troops in Iraq, in spite of the recent terrorist slayings of a South Korean civilian and two Japanese diplomats in that country. While the Japanese troops are on a mission similar to that of the Filipino soldiers, South Korea has promised to send additional military personnel to Iraq.

Manila risks souring US ties, pulls out Iraq troops

Manila, July 16 (Reuters): The Philippines defied the US and began to pull its troops out of Iraq today, bowing to the demands of militants holding a Filipino hostage and risking souring relations with its key ally and trading partner.

The move brought harsh criticism from Australia, another US ally in the region, but words of support from Muslim Malaysia. Philippine foreign Affairs Secretary Delia Albert said in a televised broadcast that 11 soldiers, including the head of the 51-member humanitarian contingent, would leave Iraq today to save the life of a Filipino held hostage there by gunmen.

A videotaped message aired late yesterday showed hostage Angelo de la Cruz alive, looking well and saying he would be home soon. Another message from his captors said he would only be freed after Manila kept

its word to withdraw all its troops.

"The Philippine government has recalled the head of the Philippine humanitarian contingent in Iraq. He is leaving Iraq today with 10 members of the Philippine humanitarian contingent," Albert said.

"The rest of the members of the contingent will be out of Iraq shortly." The troops had been scheduled to leave on August 20.

Contingent commander Brigadier General Jovito Palparan would leave Iraq at 1300 GMT today, Albert said later.

The 10 other soldiers began their journey out of Iraq bound for Kuwait earlier in the day and will fly from Kuwait to Manila on a commercial flight. A source at Manila's international airport said the soldiers would arrive on Monday.

Relatives of the hostage who have been on a rollercoaster ride of emotions since his kidnapping last week and subsequent false reports of release, urged Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo today to stick to the pullout plan.

"Set him free. We have faith in President Arroyo," said the hostage's younger brother Francisco de la Cruz in the family's

home village north of Manila today.

In Buenavista, villagers were preparing a homecoming for the father of eight. Men set up a big tent and posted signs to de la Cruz's house. The area was decked out with yellow ribbons.

Despite the mounting pressure at home and abroad, Arroyo has remained silent on her country's decision to meet the demands of hostage-takers, and on the criticism from allies.

"I don't want to be harsh on a friend but... it's a mistake and it won't buy them immunity," Australian Prime Minister John Howard told Australian radio.

Japan issued a statement urging Manila to stand up to the kidnappers. But Muslim Malaysia was much more conciliatory.

"It's a sovereign decision. I think they have taken into account what they need to take into account," foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar said after a meeting with Albert in Manila.

The US has expressed disappointment at the withdrawal plans and warned Manila to remember who its friends are.

Some analysts say the pullout will severely strain Manila's relations with Washington, costing it millions of dollars of vital

US aid and damaging the government's credibility abroad.

"Opportunities for participating in the reconstruction of Iraq are now lost," said AB Capital economic analyst Jose Vistan. "Another concern is how the US, the country's largest trading partner, would react to the pullout in terms of investments and aid."

Foreign affairs secretary Albert sidestepped reporters' questions about the relationship with the US, but others were quick to insist ties remained strong.

"We have always been strong allies and we believe that this situation will remain," presidential spokesman Ignacio Bunye said in a television interview.

Roberto Romulo, chairman of the Philippines taskforce for the reconstruction of Iraq, said: "We are a member of the coalition of the willing. We have been since the beginning."

Manila begins Iraq pullout

MANILA, July 14. — The Philippines today said it has begun pulling out its forces from Iraq following Islamic militant threats to execute the Filipino truck driver hostage. Foreign secretary Ms Delia Albert suggested in a statement released by the presidential palace that eight of the Philippines' contingent of 51 soldiers and police had left the country. "The foreign ministry is coordinating the pullout of the humanitarian contingent with the ministry of defence," she said. "As of today, our head count is down from 51 to 43," she added without elaborating.

Militants kidnapped Mr Angelo de la Cruz (46) last week and threatened to behead him unless President Ms Gloria Arroyo advanced the scheduled pullout of the contingent by one month to 20 July. A Philippine government official said Manila had "no

Move criticised

MANILA, July 14. — The Philippines government's decision to withdraw troops was criticised by Washington and its allies, who said the US-led coalition would suffer for this.

US state department spokesman Mr Richard Boucher said any pullout "sends the wrong message" to hostage-takers "at a time when Iraq is fighting for stability and peace." — AP

information" on the situation of the Filipino hostage after the expiry of the deadline set by the kidnapper adding, he could not confirm foreign television news reports that Mr de la Cruz was about to be released.

The official said Manila was expected to announce later today the whereabouts of the eight members of the Filipino contingent. — AFP

Hostage pressure mounts on Philippines

By Atul Aneja

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MANAMA, JULY 13. As the deadline set for the beheading of the Filipino hostage kidnapped by militants nears, a senior official from the Philippines has said that troops from his country would leave Iraq "as soon as possible".

In an interview with the Arabic television channel *Al Jazeera*, the Philippines Deputy Foreign Minister, Rafael Segius, said that troops would leave "swiftly, in the time it takes to carry out the necessary preparation for their return to the Philippines". Manila's forces are slated to leave by August 20, but the militants have demanded they should depart a month earlier.

Militants holding the Filipino national, Angelo de la Cruz, said they would kill him if the Philippines did not speed up a planned pullout.

The army said it was yet to receive fresh orders following remarks by the Deputy Foreign Minister. In his interview, Mr. Segius did not spell out any specific date for the departure of troops.

"I hope the statement that I read will touch the heart of this group," Mr. Segius, who is visiting Baghdad, added.

The Philippines Foreign Minister, Delia Albert, repeated the statement by her deputy, but did not clarify on the timetable for the withdrawal.

Confusion over Manila pull-out; Army awaits order

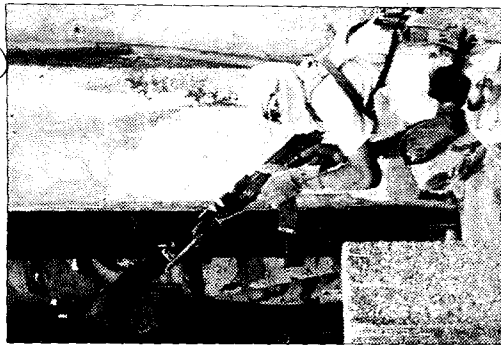
STUART GRUDGINGS
MANILA, JULY 13

THE Philippine Army was awaiting word on Tuesday on whether it would withdraw from Iraq earlier than scheduled amid confusion over Manila's response to militants threatening to behead a hostage if troops did not pull out.

Foreign ministry officials held an emergency meeting in Manila after the Arabic Al Jazeera television station showed Deputy Foreign Minister Rafael Seguis offering to withdraw Philippine forces "as soon as possible" to save hostage Angelo De La Cruz. But an Army spokesman said there was no official order to withdraw and the family of De La Cruz was sceptical after a series of misleading government statements since the crisis began with the 46-year-old truck driver's abduction last week.

"We have not had an order from any office regarding the pull-out," Army spokesman Daniel Lucero said. "We are prepared to implement our withdrawal plan."

A senior Army officer said it was possible to pullout the small Philippine contingent within three days, in line with the militants' demands for a



Iraqi police during a raid in Baghdad on Monday. President Ghazi Al-Yawar has vowed to restore the death penalty and take a "sword" to insurgents, but promised amnesty to any who stop fighting. Reuters

withdrawal by July 20, but that it would require logistical assistance from the US.

In his statement, Seguis gave no date for a withdrawal and senior officials declined to comment before an expected briefing in Manila by Foreign Secretary Delia Albert.

Meanwhile, Philippine Foreign

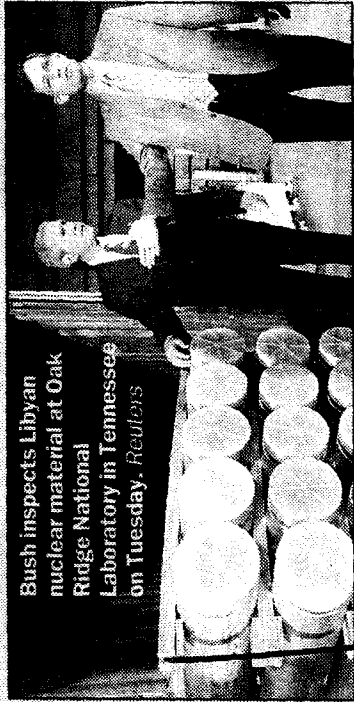
RICHARD W. STEVENSON & JODI WILGOREN
OAK RIDGE, JULY 13

PRESIDENT Bush on Monday defended his decision to go to war against Iraq, saying the invasion was the right thing to do even though no banned weapons have been found there.

In his first remarks on foreign policy since the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on Friday that the main assessments used to justify the war were overstated or unsupported by the underlying intelligence, Bush acknowledged the committee's concerns. His speech was a broad reaffirmation of his ap-

proach to heading off potential threats from terrorists and nations seeking or holding nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. "Today, because America has acted and because the US has led, the forces of terror and tyranny have suffered defeat, and America and the world are safer," Bush said. He sought to make a case that because Saddam had a proven record of making and using banned

Bush inspects Libyan nuclear material at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee on Tuesday. Reuters



Secretary Delia Albert backed a statement by her deputy that Manila would pull its troops out of Iraq "as soon as possible" but did not give any further clarification on the timing. "When Deputy Foreign Minister Rafael Seguis spoke this morning during his interview with Al Jazeera, he spoke with foreknowledge and

full authority of the Philippine government," Albert said. But Albert did not say if Manila would meet the demand of militants threatening to kill Filipino hostage Angelo De La Cruz to withdraw troops by July 20 — a month ahead of the long-scheduled departure date. President Gloria Macapagal

Arroyo's government had previously said it would not change plans to withdraw its 51 soldiers. But she faced a tough dilemma between saving De La Cruz, who comes from her home province, and maintaining her staunch alliance with the US, which led the war on Iraq and is a major donor of military

aid to the Philippines. Churches around the predominantly Roman Catholic country have held special masses to pray for De La Cruz, but protests led by Left-wing groups have been small, with many seeming to recognise the government faces a tough choice. Giving in to the militants' de-

Bush defends decision to invade Iraq

weapons, and reasons for giving them to terrorists, and that leaving him in power was not an option after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

"Although we have not found stockpiles of WMDs, we were right to go into Iraq," Bush said. "We removed a declared enemy of the US who had the capability of producing weapons of mass murder and could have passed that capability to terrorists bent on acquiring them. In the world after 9/11 that was a risk we could not afford to take."

In his half-hour speech at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Bush ranged widely over the actions his administration has taken over the past three years. —NYT

mands would open the government to criticism that it is encouraging further hostage-takings.

"The price of sticking to moral principle might be stiff in the short term," newspaper columnist Alex Magno wrote on Tuesday.

"But if we appease the bad elements, we will encourage conditions that create even more victims."

Manila sent its top West Asian envoy to Baghdad to negotiate for De La Cruz's release, and the hostage's wife flew to Jordan to make a televised appeal for his life.

Seguis's statement followed a new deadline for De La Cruz also shown on Al Jazeera in which militants said he was being prepared for execution and would be killed shortly unless Manila agreed to pull out its troops by July 20. The latest deadline came as a shock for the family and friends who have been waiting and praying at De La Cruz's house, after Philippine officials said on Monday that the militants had added 48 hours to a deadline of 1900 GMT on Sunday. Philippine officials wrongly said that De La Cruz was close to release on Saturday, prompting premature celebrations at his house, where friends and relatives have gathered to hold vigils and pray for his safety. —Reuters

aid to the Philippines. Churches around the predominantly Roman Catholic country have held special masses to pray for De La Cruz, but protests led by Left-wing groups have been small, with many seeming to recognise the government faces a tough choice. Giving in to the militants' de-

Manila confirms pullout

Philippine Daily Inquirer/ANN

MANILA, July 13.— The foreign affairs secretary, Mr Delia Albert, today confirmed a Philippine envoy's statement on Arabian television that said the government would withdraw its humanitarian team from Iraq in exchange for the life of the truck driver, Mr Angelo de la Cruz.

"When Deputy Foreign minister Mr Rafael Seguis spoke this morning during his interview with Al-Jazeera, he spoke with foreknowledge and authority of the Philippine government," Mr Albert said in a statement.

Mr Seguis had told the Al-Jazeera television network that the Philippines would pull its troops out of Iraq swiftly, which Mr de la Cruz's kidnappers are demanding. He did not give an exact date for the withdrawal of the Philippine soldiers and policemen who have been working in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition. The humanitarian contingent of 43 soldiers and eight policemen is scheduled to leave Iraq on 20 August.

Mr Albert did not face members of the media who were at the department of Foreign Affairs headquarters in Pasay City. The DFA spokesman Mr Gilberto Asuque would not comment further on the statement and evaded questions from the media.

The Iraqi insurgents' deadline to the

Olympic head attacked

BAGHDAD, July 13.— Assassins tried to kill the head of Iraq's Olympic committee, Ahmed al-Hijeya, today in an ambush of his convoy. He was heading to a television interview when his two-car convoy was ambushed on Baghdad's Haifa Street.

Insurgents fired rocket-propelled grenades, damaging his bodyguards' car and injuring one of the guards, Mr Al-Hijeya said.

"I am surprised at this attack because the Olympic committee has nothing to do with politics. This committee belongs to all Iraqis, regardless of their political, religious or ethnic origins," Mr Al-Hijeya said. — AFP

Philippine government expired before dawn today. Reports from Al-Jazeera and CNN said Mr de la Cruz would be released by his captors either Tuesday or Wednesday following the government's decision to pull out its troops.

Qazi 'honoured': "My top priority will be to serve Iraqis," said Mr Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, on his selection as the UN envoy to Iraq, adds AP from Islamabad. "This assignment is an honour for me and my country," he told a TV channel. "We welcome Mr Qazi as special representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq," said Mr Masood Khan, spokesman, Pakistan foreign ministry.



A demonstration in Manila in support of Mr de la Cruz. — AFP

Opp mars Arroyo win with 'revolt' threat

Associated Press

MANILA, June 20. — President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo won another term in office today according to a final tally from the 10 May election, but the Opposition, which has warned of a possible “people power” revolt, said its claims of massive electoral fraud were ignored and vowed to keep fighting.

“This has been the most contentious canvassing perhaps in Philippine history,” House Speaker Mr Jose de Venecia said. “I think tonight, the nation can sleep.”

But the sleep may be troubled. The military and police have been put on full alert amid government warnings of possible destabilisation plots.

“People power” revolts ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and President Joseph Estrada in 2001. Ms Arroyo took over midway through Estrada’s six-year term and was seeking an electoral mandate to continue economic and other reforms in the poor Southeast Asian nation that is one of Washington’s closest allies.

Ms Arroyo’s victory margin was about 1.1 million votes. The Opposition has claimed Arroyo’s camp cheated action film star Fernando Poe Jr. of some 2 million ballots.

“This is a sad time in the history of our country,” Poe’s party said in a statement. “What the majority in Congress has done is to abort the truth in the womb of our sacred electoral process.”

It said pro-Arroyo lawmakers used



DONE IT: President Arroyo won a second term in office on Sunday. — AFP

their superior numbers in Congress to prevent the opposition from presenting evidence of massive electoral fraud.

Ms Arroyo’s spokesman Mr Ignacio Bunye countered that despite the delays, “the orderly processes set by our laws have ensured that the will of the people has prevailed”.

The end of the count paved the way for Arroyo’s proclamation as winner by the full Congress. But the opposition said it will question the committee’s report on the count later this week. It also could file a protest, after the proclamation, to the Supreme Court election tribunal, though that likely would take years to resolve.

The congressional committee worked through the weekend and finally finished counting the last of 176 provincial summaries of votes, called certificates of canvass, late today.

THE ... 21 JUN 2001

17 killed on Philippines polls day

MANILA, May 10. — Shootings and grenade attacks killed at least 17 people before the start of election in Philippines today, raising the overall toll from poll-related violence to more than 110 since 15 December, authorities said.

There were reports of abductions, a fire and election law violations, but no indications of major violence during the voting.

Some people in the capital complained they were turned away because their names were not on voter lists. Other precincts reported that ballots arrived late or not at all, and voting was postponed in a couple of areas by bad weather. When the polls closed after eight hours, some polling

stations reported long lines of people still trying to vote.

The administration has claimed the Opposition plans a campaign of violence, including bombings, if it loses, while the Opposition has accused the President and her aides of carrying out massive vote fraud, possibly setting the stage for street protests. Nearly 230,000 troops and police were on red alert nationwide.

"Our future as a free country rests on this election," President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo told reporters, showing off an index finger stained with indelible ink. "An election equalizes power. Let us guard our future," the President said. — AP



Philippines Opposition candidate Fernando Poe casts his vote on Monday. — AFP

Arroyo widens lead over Opp candidate: survey

Philippine Daily Inquirer/
Asia News Network

MANILA, May 5. —
Philippines President
Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo
increased her lead over
closest rival Mr Fernando
Poe Junior of the
Opposition Coalition of
United Filipinos in the lat-
est Pulse Asia survey,
which was posted on its
website today.

The survey, taken from
26 April through 29 April
among 1,800 respondents
nationwide, showed elec-
toral support for Ms
Arroyo going up by three
per cent at 37 per cent,
from the previous 34 per

cent, while Mr Poe's rating
remained at 31 per cent.

The six-per cent differ-
ence between their scores
is greater than the 2.4-per
cent margin of error, the
survey said.

"This confirms that
President Arroyo contin-
ues to pick up steam as we
approach election day,"
presidential spokesman
Mr Ignacio Bunye said.

In the vice-presidential
race, administration can-
didate Senator Noli de
Castro remained on top,
but decreased his lead
over closest opponent,
Senator Loren Legarda,
by three percentage
points, the survey said.

Legarda is Poe's running
mate.

Senator Panfilo Lacson
overtook former educa-
tion secretary Mr Raul
Roco for the third spot
with 11 per cent, a slight
increase from his 10 per
cent rating in the Pulse
Asia survey in March.

Mr Roco dropped to
fourth spot with seven per-
cent from 12 percent in
the last survey. Pulse Asia
said this could be attrib-
uted to his two-week ab-
sence from the campaign
trail due to an illness.

Evangelist Mr Eduardo
"Eddie" Villanueva rem-
ained at the bottom with
five per cent.



REACHING OUT: President Arroyo greets supporters during a poll campaign in Quezon City, Philippines, on Wednesday. — AFP