

Editorial

Maguindanao: Shock and awe

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ALREADY SHOCKED BY THE ENORMITY OF THE Nov. 23 massacre in Ampatuan, Maguindanao, Filipinos have been stunned by the size of the war arsenal the Ampatuan clan have built and awed by the wealth they have amassed.

The government crackdown on the warlord clan, believed to be behind the mass murder and mutilation of 57 unarmed civilians, has led to the discovery of hundreds of high-powered firearms, including assault rifles, grenade launchers, machine guns, mortars, anti-tank missiles and armored vehicles, as well as hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. A raid on a vacant lot in the provincial capital, Shariff Aguak, on Dec. 3 yielded enough firearms and ammunition to equip an entire battalion, according to the chief of the Philippine National Police, Director-General Jesus Verzosa. Last Tuesday, a raid on a warehouse owned by the clan patriarch, Gov. Andal Ampatuan Sr., led to the discovery of guns, missiles and ammunition which military officials said packed enough power to blow up a small town.

It was not just the sophistication and the size of the arms stockpile that surprised the government raiding teams. The recovered weapons showed another damning detail: markings on the crates said they came from the military and police arsenal.

An embarrassed military immediately vowed to launch an investigation to determine how so much sophisticated weaponry had fallen into the hands of the warlords of Maguindanao and to find out who was responsible for it. Which should not be very hard to do, unless the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the PNP maintain a primitive system of record-keeping. The markings on the crates say where they came from and what year they were issued. From these it should be easy enough to find out who were responsible for their delivery (or sale) to the Ampatuans. But would the Arroyo administration really want to go after the accountable officials? Would it even want the public to know who they are?

The government has never denied that it had been arming and supporting the civilian volunteer organizations set up by the Ampatuans to help fight the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front. But apparently very few in government knew how big this private army had grown and how heavy its firepower had become. The Arroyo administration had created, nurtured and pampered the Frankenstein monster that carried out the mass murder in Maguindanao. It is doubtful if it would allow the military to reveal the identities of those who directly fed the monster and helped it grow in strength and arrogance.

More promising perhaps is a parallel probe into the fabulous wealth of the Ampatuans who control not just the provincial government and 18 out of Maguindanao's 36 towns but also that of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The series of military and police raids on their properties has shown how the Ampatuans wallow in wealth amidst the extreme poverty of their constituents. Maguindanao may be the second poorest province in the country, but the Ampatuans can be counted among the nation's wealthiest families.

Military authorities have said Andal Ampatuan Sr. and his children probably own as many as 23 houses in Maguindanao, Davao City and Metro Manila, including several mansions. One mansion, owned by ARMM Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan, has been described as a palace-in-the-making. It sits on a 2,000-sq m lot inside Davao City's enclave of the rich and is surrounded by a 12-foot high concrete fence. It has marble floors, a receiving room measuring 300 sq m, a swimming pool and 22-airconditioning units.

Family members also move around in style. In one Ampatuan compound, soldiers found a Hummer, a Toyota Land Cruiser, a Chevrolet Suburban, a GMC truck, two Toyota Hi-Lux pick-ups, a Ford F150, an Isuzu D-Max pick-up, a Toyota Hi-Ace van and two military trucks.

All of these have led authorities to wonder where the family got its wealth since most of its members are working in government as governors, mayors, vice mayors, etc. Were they perhaps helping themselves to government funds?

An audit of ARMM funds is said to be under way, particularly its P8-billion budget for development. A look at the statements of assets, liabilities and net worth of the Ampatuans in government should show quite easily whether they have been earning enough to afford those expensive cars, mansions and war materiel.

But the question remains: Will the administration have the heart and the will to go after its old and reliable political ally?

P.S.

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