

Joma Sison arrested

Arroyo: It's a giant step toward peace, justice

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THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS — In a move President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo hailed as “a giant step toward peace,” Dutch police arrested Filipino communist rebel leader Jose Maria Sison on Tuesday on suspicion of ordering the murder of two former allies in the Philippines.

Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), was arrested in Utrecht, the central Dutch city where he has lived in exile for nearly 19 years. He applied for political asylum in The Netherlands in October 1988.

“Sison was suspected of giving orders, from the Netherlands, to murder his former political associates in the Philippines, Romulo Kintanar and Arturo Tabara,” said a statement from the Public Prosecutor's Office in The Hague.

Sison was due to appear in a Hague court on Friday for a remand hearing.

“It's a giant step toward peace, a victory for justice and the rule of law,” Ms Arroyo said in a statement in Manila issued by Malacañang.

Ms Arroyo was informed of Sison's sudden arrest while she was presiding over a National Security Council meeting called to discuss the crafting of an amnesty bill for communist rebels.

Sison now calls himself a political consultant for the Dutch-based National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDF), which has been involved in off-and-on peace negotiations for many years with the government.

Sison's lawyer, Jose Jalandoni, said he was on his way to see Sison but could not confirm if the arrest was related to the murder charges filed against the communist leader in the Philippines.

The son of NDF chief peace negotiator Luis Jalandoni, however, said he did not know of any murder charges Sison is facing in The Netherlands.

Presidential Management Staff head Cerge Remonde confirmed Sison's arrest was discussed during the NSC meeting.

A Cabinet member, who asked not to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter, said Ms Arroyo was elated upon hearing the news and promptly “congratulated” National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales for the feat.

Armed Forces of the Philippines spokesman Lt. Col. Bartolome Bacarro said: “The arrest of Sison is a triumph of justice. Ironic as it is, he is assured of his day in court — a right denied to the thousands of innocent victims of communist kangaroo courts.”

“This is history catching up with Mr. Sison. This is the long arm of the law catching up with Mr. Sison,” he added.

Bacarro also noted that news of Sison's arrest came after the 26th anniversary of the Plaza Miranda bombing in Manila in 1971, which was blamed on the communist leader.

Sison, 68, will be on trial in the Netherlands, not the Philippines, said spokesperson Wim de Bruin of the Public Prosecutor's Office.

"There is no extradition request," De Bruin said. "These are crimes that were committed in the Netherlands. Ordering murders is a crime according to Dutch law."

Kintanar, former leader of the NPA, was gunned down in a Japanese restaurant in Quezon City on Jan. 23, 2003.

Tabara and his son-in-law, Stephen Ong, were shot dead in a parking lot, also in Quezon City, as they got out of their car on Sept. 26, 2004. Tabara was a former member of the highest command of the NPA.

The NPA had claimed responsibility for the slayings. They said they executed Kintanar for his alleged crimes against the "revolution and the people." They also branded Tabara as a "seasoned criminal and fanatic contra-revolutionist."

Kintanar and Tabara led a faction of the CPP that broke away from the party in the early 1990s.

Computers, CDs seized

In Utrecht, teams of police raided Sison's office, seizing computers, CDs, documents and books, said Aldo Gonzalez, who said he was questioned during the six-hour police operation at the office.

Gonzalez, who said he was a staff member of the NDF's negotiating team, dismissed the well-known allegations against Sison for the murders.

"They are all fabricated charges," Gonzalez said.

Prosecutors said at least seven other addresses were searched in Utrecht and the nearby town of Abcoude as part of the investigation.

The European Union added Sison to its terror list in October 2002. He was placed on the list both as an individual and as a member of the NPA.

Sison's arrest came as a shock to some of his leftist allies in the Philippines.

Bayan Muna party-list Rep. Teodoro Casiño told the Philippine Daily Inquirer: "It was unexpected. There has been no development in the Philippines that would make the situation drastically different now from months ago."

The left-wing group Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan) condemned Sison's arrest and the raids on his group's offices as attacks on civil liberties.

"This bodes ill for the peace process," the militant group said. "The arrest was most probably undertaken with the knowledge and prodding of the Arroyo government, which is out to sabotage all hopes for peace talks."

The peace negotiations have been stalled for around three years because of the inclusion of the CPP, NPA and Sison on the terror lists of the United States, European Union and other countries. His assets have been frozen and the Dutch state also blocked his pension.

Although Sison won one legal challenge against the listing, his name reappeared on a subsequent review of the list. To get that lifted he will have to file a separate legal challenge.

The Filipino consul in The Netherlands, Adriano Cruz, said that Sison was still on the terrorist list of the United States and the European Union, and that his assets in the Netherlands had been frozen by the European Union.

Carl Ala, spokesman of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, Peasant Movement of the Philippines), said Sison could be held for three to as long as 105 days on charges of “multiple murders and for calling for more murders.”

“They are really intensifying the attacks on progressive forces,” said Ala in a text message.

‘Incitement to murder’

Sison, who left for the Netherlands in 1987, had filed for political asylum but his request was rejected by the Dutch authorities. They ruled, however, that he could not be sent back to the Philippines because his life would be in danger here.

De Bruin explained that Sison’s arrest did not mean the Dutch planned to extradite him, as Manila had requested in 2003.

“This is a Dutch criminal case as ordering a murder even if it is committed abroad is a criminal offense under Dutch law,” De Bruin said.

The official charge against Sison is “incitement to murder in the Philippines,” according to Bayan spokesperson Renato Reyes, quoting Sison’s lawyer in the Netherlands, Jan Fermon.

Reyes said Dutch police raided the homes of Sison, NDF panel chair Luis Jalandoni, NDF staff Ruth de Leon, and their respective offices.

“The raid is still ongoing,” Reyes said when he texted the Inquirer at around 9:30 p.m.

Multiple murder

“A lawyer from The Netherlands called us up informing us of the arrest of Professor Sison pursuant to a warrant of arrest for multiple murder case here in the Philippines,” said lawyer Rachel Pastores of the Public Interest Law Center.

Pastores said the warrant was served right at Sison’s home in Utrecht, where he has been living with his wife, Juliet Delima.

“He was brought to The Hague where he’s detained temporarily,” she said, adding that Dutch laws allow detention for up to three days.

Pastores stressed that Sison had no pending criminal case in The Netherlands, so the only possible reason for the arrest was the cases lodged against him in the Philippines.

According to Pastores, Sison is a political refugee, “meaning he can’t be (forcibly) returned home because that would endanger his life.”

She said that even when Sison was included on the US and EU terror lists, the Dutch government did not deport him to the Philippines.

"How can he be tried in The Hague for murder charges allegedly committed in the Philippines?" she asked, noting that the Philippines did not have an extradition treaty with The Netherlands.

In an interview with Dutch daily "De Pers" a month ago, Sison cast himself as a peacemaker and mediator in the Philippines. He rejected allegations from Manila about his involvement in crimes there.

"I am clean, legally speaking also in the Philippines," Sison had told De Pers.

Sison complained about his financial situation saying that the Dutch government's freezing of his welfare and pension allowances meant he had to live off gifts from the Filipino community and his wife's welfare cheques.

"I am poor. Nobody wants to help me financially because when they do they could be accused of helping a terrorist," he had said.

Last March, the Philippine government asked Interpol to issue arrest warrants for Sison and other members of the CPP for their alleged role in the killing of suspected "spies and counter-revolutionaries" from 1985 to 1991.

In August last year forensic investigators found the remains of 67 people from a communist "killing field" in the central island of Leyte.

The communists, who once had more than 20,000 armed fighters, today have fewer than 7,000 armed combatants throughout the Philippines.

Sison maintains that he no longer leads the so-called revolutionary movement and is simply an advisor.

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* Agence France-Presse, Associated Press, Inquirer, INQUIRER.net

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