

Sayyaf Negotiators Detained; Former Rebels Stand Behind Jailed Leader

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ZAMBOANGA CITY, Philippines (Mindanao Examiner / June 19, 2008) – Former Muslim separatist rebels have stood behind one of their leaders accused as involved in the kidnapping of a Filipino television presenter and three others in the southern island of Sulu.

The Moro National Liberation Front said it is behind Sulu Mayor Alvarez Isnaji, who was implicated by the police along with his son, Haider, to the Abu Sayyaf kidnapping June 8 of Ces Drilon and her cameramen Jimmy Encarnacion and Angelo Valderama, of ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corp., and their guide Octavio Dinampo.

“We were all shocked by the news. This is very unfortunate because Mayor Isnaji is a good man. We don’t believe he is involved in anyway with the kidnappings and he should be set free by the authorities,” MNLF chieftain Muslimin Sema told the Mindanao Examiner.

Sema, who is also the mayor of Cotabato City, said Isnaji’s arrest could have an effect in his candidacy in the regional elections in August. “This incident will surely have an effect on the candidacy of Mayor Isnaji,” he said. Isnaji, of Indanan town, is one of seven candidates for governor in the Muslim autonomous region, whose current leadership, Zaldy Ampatuan, is a known ally of President Gloria Arroyo.

Press Secy. Jesus Dureza said authorities are still investigating Isnaji’s involvement in the kidnapping of Drilon’s group. “Let us wait for the results of the ongoing investigation. The government’s trajectory now is to get all those involved in the kidnapping and apply the full force of the law.”

“If there is sufficient evidence adduced against anyone, Mayor Isnaji included, then the axe of justice will necessarily take its swing. On the other hand, if there is no sufficient quantum of proof to link Mayor Isnaji to the kidnapping, then he deserves exculpation and full vindication,” he said.

Isnaji is also the current chairman of the Sulu League of Municipalities. Before he became mayor, Isnaji was the Speaker of the Regional Legislative Assembly in the Muslim autonomous region and became also the acting regional governor in 2001.

He is also a senior member of the MNLF’s Central Committee which signed a peace agreement with Manila in 1996.

Isnaji was handpicked by the Abu Sayyaf to negotiate for the release of the hostages. He admitted paying several hundreds of thousands of pesos for the freedom of Drilon’s group on top of a package of livelihood aids and infrastructure projects allegedly promised by Senator Loren Legarda, who helped in the negotiations.

“Senator Loren Legarda herself promised livelihood aids and infrastructure projects for these people. We did not pay ransom except for one hundred thousand pesos as payment for (board and lodging) expenses. Our commitment to the kidnappers is livelihood and infrastructure projects, such

as farm-to-market roads,” Isnaji said.
Legarda denied promising anything to the Abu Sayyaf.

The Abu Sayyaf freed the four hostages separately after reportedly collecting as much as P20 million ransoms. Police insisted no ransom was paid to the militant group tied to al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya.

Sulu Gov. Sakur Tan, the head of the local crisis management committee, has repeatedly discouraged negotiators from paying ransom to the Abu Sayyaf because he said the money would likely be used to buy weapons and finance terrorism and more kidnappings in the island, one of six provinces under the Muslim autonomous region.

Interior Secy. Ronaldo Puno said Isnaji and his son have been detained in Manila. The two were picked up in Zamboanga City after they accompanied Drilon’s group on Wednesday.

Puno said the duo could be held liable for kidnapping. “The charges can range from anywhere to being a co-conspirator in the kidnappings to being a principal in the kidnapping incident,” he said.

Puno tagged the group of Radulan Sahiron as behind the kidnapping of Drilon’s group who was intercepted in Maimbung town while on their way to secretly interview the Abu Sayyaf leader.

Police also implicated Abu Sayyaf leaders Albader Parad, Gafur Jumdail, Umbra Jumdail, Tuan Walis and Sulayman Patta as among about 30 gunmen involved in the kidnappings.

Military authorities on Thursday also presented Dinampo to journalists in Zamboanga City after media reports claimed he was also arrested on suspicion as being involved in the kidnapping.

“I am not being held against my will,” Dinampo, also the leader of the independent Mindanao People’s Caucus, said inside a tightly guarded room at the Western Mindanao Command headquarters.

Lt. Gen. Nelson Allaga, regional military chief, said Dinampo, a professor of the Mindanao State University, underwent a routine debriefing, the same procedures the freed hostages also went through.

“We did not hold him and he is here with his family and friends and they will return home to Davao City,” Allaga said.

Dinampo, clad in a white t-shirt and a pair of denim pants, was in tears as he told his ordeal in the hands of the Abu Sayyaf. He also defended Isnaji and said the former MNLF rebel leader, was instrumental in their release.

“There is no basis for the authorities to hold Mayor Isnaji. Isnaji was someone the negotiators trust since (Sulu Deputy Gov. Nur Ana) Sahidulla was rejected by the Abu Sayyaf,” Dinampo said.

Security forces were preparing for a fresh offensive against the Abu Sayyaf after militants freed all their hostages. “We are now tracking down the kidnappers,” Allaga said.

Police in Sulu said security forces manning a checkpoint along KM.2 in Jolo town have recovered Thursday some 2,500 pieces of blasting caps from two men. It was unknown where the contraband came, but blasting caps are widely used in illegal fishing in Sulu, about 1,000 kilometers south of Manila.

The United States listed the Abu Sayyaf as a foreign terrorist organization and has offered rewards of up to \$5 million for the capture of its known leaders. It also deployed a few hundred Marines and Special Forces soldiers in Sulu to help the Filipino military defeat the Abu Sayyaf. (Mindanao Examiner)

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* From:

<http://zamboangajournal.blogspot.com/2008/06/southern-philippines-military-chief-lt.html>