

Crackdown ordered against armed groups : Arroyo attacks political 'armies'

By Carlos H. Conde, International Herald Tribune

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President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo ordered the police and the military on Thursday to dismantle "private armies," long considered the main source of election-related violence in the Philippines.

Arroyo, in a statement less than two months before general elections on May 10, said these armed groups "pose a threat to free and orderly polls, especially in areas declared as election hot spots and areas of concern."

The armed groups, whose number the police now put at 125, are formed by politicians to protect themselves and to intimidate their opponents and voters during elections. Their members can be seen in civilian clothes, escorting politicians, brandishing guns in public. The police said they dismantled 80 of 114 armed groups in the 2001 elections.

The groups, which typically have a dozen to several dozen members, are often led by former policemen or military officials and, in some instances, former rebels. They are commonly referred to as goons, part of the "three G's" of politics: guns, gold and goons.

Elections in the Philippines have always been violent. Since campaigning for the May 10 local and national elections began in January, 46 people have been killed in 42 incidents of violence, according to the Philippine National Police. The authorities recorded 267 incidents of election violence in the 1998 elections and 269 in the 2001 elections. But the police did not release the number of casualties in these elections.

"We project that the number of cases would increase," Avelino Razon Jr., the police operations chief, told reporters on Wednesday. "The elections are still far yet we already have a significant number."

Earlier, the police listed more than 500 towns and cities as election "hot spots" and "areas of concern." These classifications were based on incidents in past elections, the presence of insurgent groups and armed groups, and intense rivalry among local politicians. The violence this year has so far involved political parties and political dynasties, mainly in small towns and cities.

Guns, many of them illegally made or bought, usually proliferate during elections, despite of a gun ban imposed by the Commission on Elections, which has arrested more than a thousand violators since December.

A few violent cases involved the Communist New People's Army, which has been collecting fees from candidates who enter areas that rebels claim as their territory.

In one incident, a candidate for Congress who had refused to pay the Communists was ambushed when she entered a known rebel area with a military escort of several soldiers in the northern Philippines.

Members of a popular leftist political group called Bayan Muna have also been targets. Dozens of its members have been killed since it won congressional seats in 2001. The attacks have intensified since the start of campaigning for this year's elections.

Website Link:

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