

## **No Deal in Erap Pardon: Ermita**

By BERT PELAYO

Special to the Filipino Reporter

"Filipino Reporter. 2-8 November 2007"

Executive Secretary Eduardo R. Ermita said he did not know of "any deal" behind the grant of executive clemency by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to former President Joseph Estrada.

"What I know was that the pardon was an open secret at Malacañang, in the sense that it was an option being discussed at very high level," Ermita told the Filipino Reporter hours after the pardon was officially announced in Manila the other week by Press Secretary Ignacio R. Bunye, who pinched hit as executive secretary in Ermita's absence.

Ermita was in New York that day as President Arroyo's personal representative to the United Nations in connection with the general report on human rights by UN special rapporteur Philip Alston who visited the Philippines last February.

Ermita is concurrently chairman of the Presidential Human Rights Committee, an agency created precisely to address the overarching issue of alleged extrajudicial killings of labor activists and journalists in the Philippines.

"We have made headway in tackling this problem, but I have to concede that we have a long way to go before we turn a corner," said Ermita who sat down for a lunch interview on a host of issues with the Reporter at a Waldorf-Astoria restaurant.

He was referring to the creation of a task force to investigate the killings and establishing the writ of amparo which enables any aggrieved party to bring complaints against erring men in uniform for instant adjudication.

Since the creation of Task Force Usig, six convictions had been won, more than 70 cases filed in court, and five Armed Forces men are being investigated, according to Ermita, who had served as defense secretary and a three-term congressman in Batangas. "Most of the reforms we are doing are also based on the recommendations of Mr. Alston," he said, which included a change in strategy and fresh initiatives in dealing with human and political rights of Filipinos. "Our problem is compounded by our having to fight, simultaneously, the New People's Army and Muslim secessionists in the South," he said.

"And the Abu Sayyaf Group," he quickly added, alluding to the al-Qaeda linked terrorist group with a stronghold in Basilan and with

ties to the Indonesian extremist organization Jemaah Islamiyah. Ermita is also chairman of the Presidential Anti-Terrorism Committee which coordinates the government campaign against domestic terrorism in tandem with the National Security Council. Turning to the NPA, he said that its strength is waning, down from 6,000 armed groups this year from 7,000 the year before.

He said the arrest in The Netherlands of Jose Maria Sison, the exiled leader of the Communist Party of the Philippines, may have stopped the flow of private contributions or funding to the NPA from abroad. As the President's point man, Ermita rarely travels abroad. His New York visit, he said, is an exception "because of the importance the President attaches to human rights issues."

A former general who turned public servant, Ermita is generally regarded in his time as an expert in intelligence and psy-war. But despite his heavy military background, Ermita is credited with enjoying a healthy relation with mass media.

He conducts a weekly meeting with the press covering Malacañang, and appears, when asked, before the regular press briefing by Press Secretary Bunye. On political notes, he thought that the relation between President Arroyo and Speaker Jose V. de Venecia had been dented by the Speaker's son testimony in the controversial National Broadband Network/ZTE contract implicating the President and her husband. "But they have been brought together by former President Fidel V. Ramos," he said. "What's in store for you after Malacañang, the Senate?"

He merely chuckled, by way of an answer. \*\*\*

Human rights issues dominated the dialogue Executive Secretary Eduardo R. Ermita held with members of the Filipino community area at the Philippine Center in New York City on Oct. 24.

The event was organized by Consul General Cecilia Rebono who sat on the panel with Ermita and Presidential Human Rights Committee executive director Cecilia R.V. Quisumbing.

Ermita first explained his mission to New York as instructed by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to hold dialogues on the latest human rights developments with top UN officials and the UN special rapporteur Philip Alston.

"The government has reawakened its focus on the protection and promotion of human rights not only protecting those who may be targeted for their political beliefs but also those whose economic rights may be under threat, as well as the rights of women, children and other sectors," Ermita said.

Ermita emphasized that the government does not condone or tolerate killings of activists and media. He explained that these human rights violations happen because of the overall national security situation, where there are insurgency movements. He described measures the government is taking, including Department of Justice instructions to expedite and prioritize such cases, A.O. 181 which orders closer cooperation between investigators and prosecutors, and the work of Task Force Usig in the Philippine National Police.

These measures, he said, have borne fruit in the form of six convictions, more than 70 cases filed in court. He added, the Armed Forces of the Philippines is investigating five men in uniform for possible involvement in such killings.

The PHRC executive director explained the mandate of the Presidential Committee, and the new rule of court, the writ of amparo, which the Supreme Court recently promulgated.

The panelists addressed an audience representing a broad spectrum of Filipinos based in the New York–New Jersey area, including professionals and representatives of NGOs, such as Bayan and Anak. Commission on Human Rights chairperson Dr. Purificacion C.V. Quisumbing was also in the audience and added her own comments to the dialogue. She said, "There has been a sea change in the way the government handles human rights," adding, "The CHR has listened to the government and hopes it will deliver on its promises."

On other matters, Ermita told Filipinos based in New York and New Jersey that Philippine economic indicators are good, that these indicators, including the stock market were not adversely affected by the explosion on Glorietta 2 mall on Oct. 19, and that negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front continue.

Questions and comments from the floor revealed that human rights matters were very much at the forefront of the audience's concern.

"What is being done to explain these killings (of women and children who have been victims of political killings)?" asked Sally Francisco of Filipinos for Rights and Empowerment. Ruben Caranza of the International Center for Transitional Justice told the panel he wants frank responses to the issue of impunity in the armed forces.

To these, the panel reiterated the measures being taken by government to bring perpetrators to justice, to prevent further killings, and to address the perceived culture of impunity.

Malou Mapa, who identified herself as the sister of Editha Burgos, mother of a missing activist asked, "How long will it take for one group to produce Jonas Burgos?"

Ermita expressed sympathy for the Burgos family, saying he was himself following up on the matter because he was a friend of the missing activist's father Joe Burgos, and is even a godfather of Jonas' brother.

Rebong responded to an NGO statement that they have never been inside the consulate, having held their demonstrations outside. She pointed out that NGO members have always been invited to Consulate events, as all members of the Filipino community, and no one has been disallowed from entering.