

MANILA, Philippines - A retired Army colonel who took part in the investigation into the deadly Glorietta 2 mall blast in 2007 insisted yesterday it was a bomb and not methane gas which caused the explosion that killed 11 people and wounded a hundred others.

Retired colonel Allan Sollano, head of the Army Explosives and Ordnance Division team at the time of the investigation, showed up at the Department of Justice (DOJ) to personally submit to Secretary Leila de Lima an affidavit detailing results of an earlier probe that had reportedly been concealed by the previous Arroyo administration.

He did not say what prompted the alleged cover-up, but President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo at the time was barraged with calls for her resignation due to mounting accusations of corruption under her administration.

Accompanied by two lawyers, Sollano revealed that he did not release his report upon instruction of his superiors then.

"My spot report was traced and disposed of. I was also instructed not to release any statement to the media regarding the results of my investigation," Sollano said.

Although Sollano did not name any of his superiors in his affidavit, he had reported that then Army Support Command head and now Armed Forces chief of staff Gen. Ricardo David Jr. had instructed him to gloss over the bomb angle.

David recently said in response that Sollano's field of expertise was bomb disposal and not bomb investigation. While admitting that Sollano had indeed told him about the bomb angle, he said his response was to instruct him to report his findings to the Philippine National Police (PNP).

Sollano did not answer questions from the media yesterday but assured De Lima that he would attend the fact-finding investigation of the DOJ on Nov. 18.

"I'll be here on the 18th facing them. That's all," he said before leaving the room.

The retired Army official said his conscience prompted him to surface and tell everything he knew about the incident on Oct. 19, 2007.

"I want to state the truth and I cannot in conscience live with the fact that a false version of what really happened is being adopted as the main reason for the Glorietta 2 blast," he said.

Sollano said that in their investigation, "the conclusion is that the Glorietta explosion was caused by a high explosive detonation."

The other members of his team were M/Sgt. Danilo Cabanilla and Sgts. Ildefonso de la Rosa, Joven Maravilla and Rufo Dechavez.

"The nature of destruction in Glorietta indicated the detonation of a high explosive device. There was 'petalling' of the metal plate of the diesel tank located in the basement of Glorietta, which is the seat of explosion. A 'reverse' crater, or a dome, was formed by the force of the explosion in the first floor, which is directly above the basement," he said.

"Only high explosives have this destructive power. A high explosive detonation exerts equal pressure in all directions and will look for a way out through the weakest part of the structure. In the case of Glorietta, this is the first floor in which the dome or crater was formed," he explained.

He said he also found a piece of plastic on top of the diesel tank and submitted it for forensic

examination by the PNP Crime Laboratory.

He said he was later informed that the “piece of plastic tested positive for RDX, which is a component of C4, a type of plastic moldable explosive.”

He recalled that he and his team immediately went to the site after learning about the incident and conducted onsite investigation for about six to eight hours.

He stressed that they responded to an initial tip that “there has been a suspected or possible bombing incident.”

“In order for there to be a methane gas explosion, there must be necessarily a compression of the gas caused by the introduction of more gas, which was not the case here,” he said.

He also said a methane explosion would have inflicted less destruction and caused less fire.

“Finally, thousands of tons of garbage would be needed to produce a kilogram of methane gas, which is not sufficient to cause such an explosion,” he added.

Sollano was in the Army EOD for eight years before he retired in April 2008. He had served as operations officer, intelligence officer and administrative officer.

While in service, he had investigated explosions, gave technical reports, reconstructed improvised explosive devices and took charge of all operational aspects before his promotion to executive officer and commanding officer of Army EOD-National Capital Region.

He took up specialized course on explosive and ordnance, and trained to make and detonate, and neutralize or defuse explosive devices.

Witness protection

De Lima, for her part, said the family of Sollano would be placed under the witness protection program of the department.

She appealed to other personalities involved in the previous investigation to also cooperate with the DOJ and attend the hearing on Nov. 18.

Senior State Prosecutor Peter Ong, head of the DOJ team tasked to conduct a fact-finding probe after Sollano’s claims came out in the media recently, explained that the only issue they would settle is whether or not the explosion was caused by methane gas or bombing.

“If our findings will be methane gas, then we will just double check on criminal negligence found in previous investigation - if there is a need to add some more people. But if it will be explosion of bomb, then we will recommend another preliminary investigation,” Ong said.

“The important questions then would be: Was there really a cover-up? And more importantly, who were the perpetrators?”

The DOJ panel has invited 10 other personalities to the hearing: Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala, chairman and chief executive officer of Ayala Corp.; Antonino Aquino, president and CEO of Ayala Land, Inc.; PNP chief Director General Raul Bacalzo; Superintendent Albert Ignatius Ferro, chief of operations management division of PNP maritime group; Inspector Edilberto Capacete Jr., directorate for operations of PNP; National Bureau of Investigation Director Magtanggol Gatdula, and Chief Inspector Victor Drapete, chief of chemistry division of PNP crime laboratory service.

Also invited were the heads of the PNP’s Philippine Bomb Data Center and Criminal Investigation and Detection Group of PNP, and the Makati City police.