

Aquino chides US on VFA, terror alert

Written by Administrator

MANILA, Philippines - President Aquino chided the United States yesterday for voicing concern over the impending review of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) but not finding time to officially alert him of supposed terror threats used to justify travel warnings to its citizens in the Philippines.

"I understand that there were several communications between our government and the US government and the main topic on the agenda had to deal with the VFA, the review process itself... reviewing the VFA to be more precise, rather than any terrorist alerts," Mr. Aquino told reporters.

"So one has to wonder in these opportunities why they did not share intelligence that they are supposed to have possessed with their ally. So it's like in those meetings they didn't make a point of highlighting any potential terrorists in the country. Mostly, if not entirely, it was all about the VFA," he added.

The US was one of six countries that alerted their citizens against terrorist threats in the Philippines.

"We have expressed our concerns to (US) Ambassador (Harry) Thomas (Jr.). Actually, I think the first time we met and on one or two other occasions, and it is more on the concept of refining the VFA treaty," Mr. Aquino said.

"Isn't it time to review it and see if it meets all of the objectives by both parties?" he asked.

Mr. Aquino also said former US President Bill Clinton's visit to the country tomorrow for a speaking engagement would be a vote of confidence for the Philippines.

Clinton is the 42nd US president and founder of the William J. Clinton Foundation.

"I would assume that that would be a vote of confidence. The former president has a Secret Service detail still assigned to him who would object if there is a realistic and inert terrorist threat. Maybe we have been really fine-tuning our processes," Mr. Aquino said.

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The President said the people would be witnesses to the fact that especially in the most sensational cases, local security forces had been doing their job.

“If we have not been able to prevent all, we have managed to effect arrests and file cases on so many instances,” he said, citing the Bar exams explosion in Manila, the bus bombing in Cotabato, and even carjackings.

“Even in the first six cases of extralegal killings or suspected extralegal killings, the secretary of justice has informed me that we have filed cases on not less than five or six already, and of course we have to go through the process, but we are highly confident that we will be securing convictions,” Mr. Aquino said.

The President said there was no meeting arranged between him and Clinton and that he would be preparing for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit this week.

Mr. Aquino said travelers could take a cue from Clinton but more importantly, foreign governments should coordinate and analyze intelligence information with the Philippines first before making any advisories.

“Let us just emphasize what our security services have already been stating. In the media it was said there were imminent threats and unfortunately, when we started checking with all of the embassies, it seemed there was one source who referred it to a country that’s part of the commonwealth group of nations who felt duty-bound to forewarn, in the exercise of extreme conservatism maybe, and forewarned their citizens and they, in turn, disseminated the information as main intelligence,” Mr. Aquino said.

“You’ll always be getting raw reports, unverified reports, in this particular case, the report that we got even points to a sort of a discrepancy between what Islamic jihadists would do versus the planned operations,” he said.

“So even on the plausibility aspect, we find it difficult to believe. So the problem here, and I will urge again, especially our allies, let us be careful and finish the analysis of all the raw data before issuing all of these advisories,” the President said.

Mr. Aquino said that what “pains” the Philippines was that the advisories were “continuing in certain sense.”

“I would even ask the people to read, for instance, the Australian advisory. It’s almost a template and generic. But, I understand, after the Bali bombings (in Indonesia), their government has adopted the posture of being extremely cautious whenever their citizens might be exposed to threats and to err on the side of caution,” he said.

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“The problem there is that, in their side of caution, we are the ones put at a disadvantage,” Mr. Aquino said.

Clinton security

Deputy presidential spokesperson Abigail Valte said the Philippine National Police (PNP) is ready to provide security for Clinton.

Valte said the PNP National Capital Regional Police Office was already coordinating closely with the US embassy about providing appropriate security for Clinton, who would be a resource person at a Manila Hotel event entitled “Embracing Our Common Humanity.”

“Of course, we will provide the best security for former President Bill Clinton,” Valte said.

Valte said Clinton’s visit and the recent Robot Olympiad in which representatives from 22 countries participated were signs that the Philippine government was “very committed” to and “very resolved” in protecting citizens and visitors.

“We have a beautiful country. We have taken measures to tighten security and we assure everyone that everybody, not only our citizens, are amply protected,” Valte added.

Meanwhile, PNP-NCRPO Director Chief Superintendent Nicanor Bartolome reported to Malacañang that policemen including covert personnel would be stationed at the Manila Hotel, the venue for Clinton’s speaking engagement.

Metro Manila has been on full alert since All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day, and will remain so during the Christmas season.

Meanwhile, Philippine ambassador to the US Willy Gaa reported receiving assurances from Washington that it would “exercise caution” in issuing travel advisories.

Ed Malaya, DFA spokesman, said Gaa received the assurance after calling the US State Department in Washington regarding the travel advisories.

“Both sides will closely coordinate to ensure that any actionable intelligence information will be shared in a timely manner,” Malaya said.

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The DFA, in compliance with a directive from President Aquino, had fired off notes verbale to embassies of six countries that issued the travel advisories.

“The central challenge is to give all the information necessary to protect the public and at the same time try not to frighten people unreasonably,” Malaya said.

Diplomatic protest

For Eastern Samar Rep. Ben Evardone, the DFA should file diplomatic protests for the negative travel advisories.

“The DFA should file diplomatic protests against the countries that issued travel advisories without first coordinating with the Philippine government,” Evardone said.

“As an active ally in the campaign against terrorism, I think we should be treated as such unless they no longer consider us as an equal partner,” he said.

He said the unilateral actions and their “keeping us in the dark (on the information they have on the terror threat) were an insult” to us.

“We should make them feel officially through the diplomatic protest that we should not be treated as a non-entity,” Evardone said.

Feeling safe

Amid the flurry of protests and terror scares, Ambassador Thomas said it’s very safe to travel in the Philippines.

“I feel safe here in the country,” he said in an abs-cbnnews.com report.

On the sidelines of a USAID event in Malate, Thomas said the much-hyped travel advisory has been around for seven years. The post seen on the embassy’s website was a mere update, he said.

“We update it every six months... and it never said don’t come to the Philippines... but we’ve

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had it for seven years. We (also) have to be serious about safety and security,” the abs-cbnnews report quoted him as saying.

He said the US is serious about fighting terrorism not only in the Philippines but all around the world.

“There’s terrorism going on all around the world... look at what’s happening in Yemen, the cargo ships, Athens, Berlin, none of these is direct to the Philippines. This is a global threat that we have to work together to protect all of our citizens,” he added.

He said the US will continue to work with the Philippine government to protect both nations’ citizens. - With Paolo Romero and Rainier Allan Ronda