

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Miriam wants VFA abrogated...

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“By his own admission, Colonel Maxwell is using the Task Force to engage in battle in Mindanao in the US war against terrorism, which includes the Abu Sayyaf and the Jemaah Islamiyah,” Santiago said.

Maxwell was replaced as JSOTF-P commander nearly two

years ago by Lt. Col. Bill Coultrup in a regular reassignment.

Former Senate president Jovito Salonga said activities that could be undertaken under the VFA were not clear, and neither was the length of stay of US forces in the Philippines.

“We’re here at the invitation of the Armed Forces of the Phil-

ippines,” Kenney told The STAR. “As long as the (AFP) thinks we’re playing an important roles, we’re an ally and we’re staying. We’ll not be in combat.”

Resigned Lieutenant Senior Grade Nancy Gadian, who blew the whistle on the alleged misuse of funds for the Balikatan exercises between US and Philippine troops, also testified at the hearing that American soldiers were involved in military operations. She said a battalion of US troops is permanently based in the country.

Government officials led by Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita defended the agreement, citing the benefits the country was getting from it in terms of assistance and training of Filipino troops, especially in the fight against terrorism.

Santiago said that although the Philippine and US authorities were claiming that the US troops in Mindanao were only engaging in so-called military exercises, this term was not used in the VFA itself.

She said that the Task Force deployed US forces in unconventional warfare and combat operations, and Maxwell himself admitted in a US interview that he was operating “under the guise of an exercise.”

Santiago expressed suspicion that there were “small-scale military bases” in Zamboanga City and in Sulu.

Santiago said the US must negotiate a new treaty with the Philippines if it would want broader cooperation in the fight against terrorism and not use the VFA or the Mutual Defense Treaty.

She said the US would want the Philippine territory because it could be part of a defensive ring against China being formed by the US.

Santiago said the better procedure would be to ask for a renegotiation of the VFA.

“But we already did that and they refused. So we can go through that procedure but we know that they will never renegotiate it because they got exactly what they wanted. They wanted an open-ended agreement – meaning to say, that it does not say when it will end

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ASIA'S HEROES. The 2009 Ramon Magsaysay awardees, Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, pose for the media during a press presentation Thursday Aug. 27, in Manila. The awards come with a medallion and US\$50,000 is given annually to 'Asia's Heroes' in honor of the late President Ramon Magsaysay. (L-R) Yu Xiaogang of China, Deep Joshi of India, Krisana Kraissintu of Thailand, Ma Jun of China, Antonio Oposa Jr. of the Philippines, and Ka Hsaw Wa of Myanmar also known as Burma. AP Photo by Bullitt Marquez

Arroyos cleared in ZTE...

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Cases of violation of Republic Act 3019 or the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act will be filed against Abalos and Neri before the Sandiganbayan.

Also cleared in the case were Joey de Venecia and Transportation Secretary Leandro Mendoza.

The Akbayan party-list, which filed the case with Ombudsman, said Mr. Arroyo, De Venecia and Mendoza were cleared “due to lack of probable cause.” Pres. Arroyo was not indicted because she is immune from suits as incumbent president.

Also dismissed were the complaints filed against ZTE officials Lorenzo Formoso, Elmer Soneja, Yu Yong, George Zhuying, Fan Yan, and Hou Wei.

Akbayan said at a press conference that it received its copy of the Ombudsman's decision by mail.

Akbayan Rep. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel said that with the ruling, they are now urging Abalos and Neri to “speak up” and reveal everything they know about the NBN-ZTE deal.

She said the impeachment cases against Gutierrez would be pursued.

‘Pleasantly surprised’

Mr. Arroyo's lawyer said he was “pleasantly surprised” by the Ombudsman ruling.

“We’ve always been confident. They failed to show any evidence or proof (of Mr. Arroyo's involvement) and we’ve properly presented our factual and legal defense,” Ruy Rondain told The Star over the phone.

He said he has yet to receive a copy of the resolution.

He said there would be no more legal action from his office because of the dismissal.

He said Mr. Arroyo had never shown any worry while the complaint was being investigated by the Ombudsman and even during the emotional Senate hearings on the controversy.

He declined to comment on the cases of the other co-accused.

Surprised

Abalos, former chairman of the Commission on Elections, insisted he is innocent.

“I maintain my innocence. I have nothing to do with the pricing (of ZTE project),” he said. Abalos learned of the Ombudsman decision only when called by The Star.

Abalos resigned from the Comelec on Oct. 1, 2007 amid

accusations by the younger De Venecia that he had tried to broker the \$329-million NBN project.

Neri had testified before the Senate about an apparent attempt by Abalos to bribe him to convince him to endorse the project. Neri was then socioeconomic secretary when Abalos made the alleged bribe offer.

According to Abalos, the accusations of De Venecia were baseless and should not be given any weight.

“He was claiming that I was brokering for the project. But he was the one who kept on coming to Wack Wack (golf club). *Kung ako may kailangan sa kanya, bakit sya ang punta ng punta sa akin* (If I'm the one who needed something from him, then why is it that it was he who kept on coming to me)?” he asked.

Abalos added the accusation of corruption against him was “based on assumption.”

Neri also expressed surprise over the Ombudsman's decision.

“The Ombudsman filed criminal charges against me?” Neri asked, almost incredulously.

“I cannot comment about it. I don't know anything about

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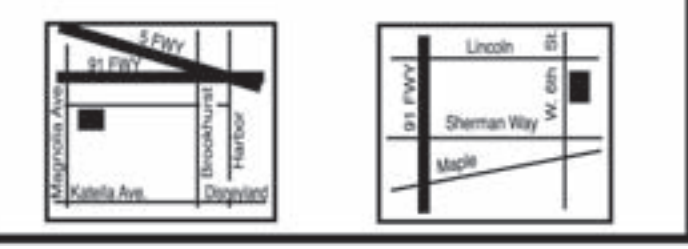


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