

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

Arroyo: Answered prayer

Lacaba kin shout for joy

by JOEL GUINTO
Inquirer.net

MANILA—President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo hailed the release of Red Cross worker Mary Jean Lacaba from the Abu Sayyaf as an answered prayer.

In a statement, the President said she was also hoping that the al Qaeda-linked bandits would free. Lacaba's two other colleagues from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)—Swiss Andreas Notter and Italian Eugenio Vagni.

"We are happy that Ms Lacaba is back with us and we hope the ASG [Abu Sayyaf Group] will also release the two other hostages very soon," Arroyo said.

"This is the answer to our people's prayers and also confirmation that we should always stand behind our policy of dealing firmly with any form of lawless behavior," she said.

Lacaba was released somewhere in Indanan town on Thursday, April 2.

The three ICRC workers were snatched last January 15 while on a humanitarian mission.

In Davao City, a relative of Lacaba's told the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* that they could not contain their happiness upon learning that she was freed by her captors.

"Nagsisigawan na kami dito," the relative, who requested anonymity, told the *Inquirer*, parent company of *Inquirer.net*.

The relative said Lacaba had talked to her family in Davao City.

Meanwhile, Senator Richard Gordon expressed gladness over the release of Lacaba.

"We are glad that one of our colleagues, Mary Jean Lacaba, is now out of harm's way after her ordeal in the hands of her captors," said Gordon, chairman of the Philippine National Red Cross.

"She is on her way to a secured place for debriefing and medical attention, and we expect her to be reunited with her family very soon," he said in a statement.

"We thank the AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines], PNP [Philippine National Police], the Local Crisis Committee and all

those who helped obtain Nene's release for their collective and individual efforts, he said.

"Whenever we can find the opportunity, we'll try by our peaceful and diplomatic actions to convince the group holding Andreas Notter and Eugenio Vagni that there is no glory in taking life, much less of innocent people who have only the welfare of the people in need in their mind," he said.

He appealed to "our Muslim brothers to release Andreas and Eugenio unharmed and as soon as possible."

"Let us continue on offering our special prayers and sacrifices until the freedom of our two colleagues is finally obtained," he said. ■

ICRC: 'Nightmare not over'

by ABIGAIL KWOK
Inquirer.net

MANILA—The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) welcomed the release of Filipina Mary Jean Lacaba but said that the "nightmare of the abduction is not over."

In a statement posted on the ICRC website, Alain Aeschlimann, the head of operations for East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific, said that Lacaba, who was released Thursday, April 2 by the Abu Sayyaf in Kuppung, Sulu, "appears to be in good health, although very tired and extremely worried for her two colleagues, Eugenio Vagni and Andreas Notter."

"Once again, we ask that they remain unharmed. While we welcome this first positive move, especially after a very tense and difficult week, we reiterate our appeal to the kidnappers to let Eugenio Vagni and Andreas Notter go without delay and unconditionally," Aeschlimann said. The ICRC expressed concern over the safety of Vagni and Notter but said they appreciated government efforts for the release of Lacaba.

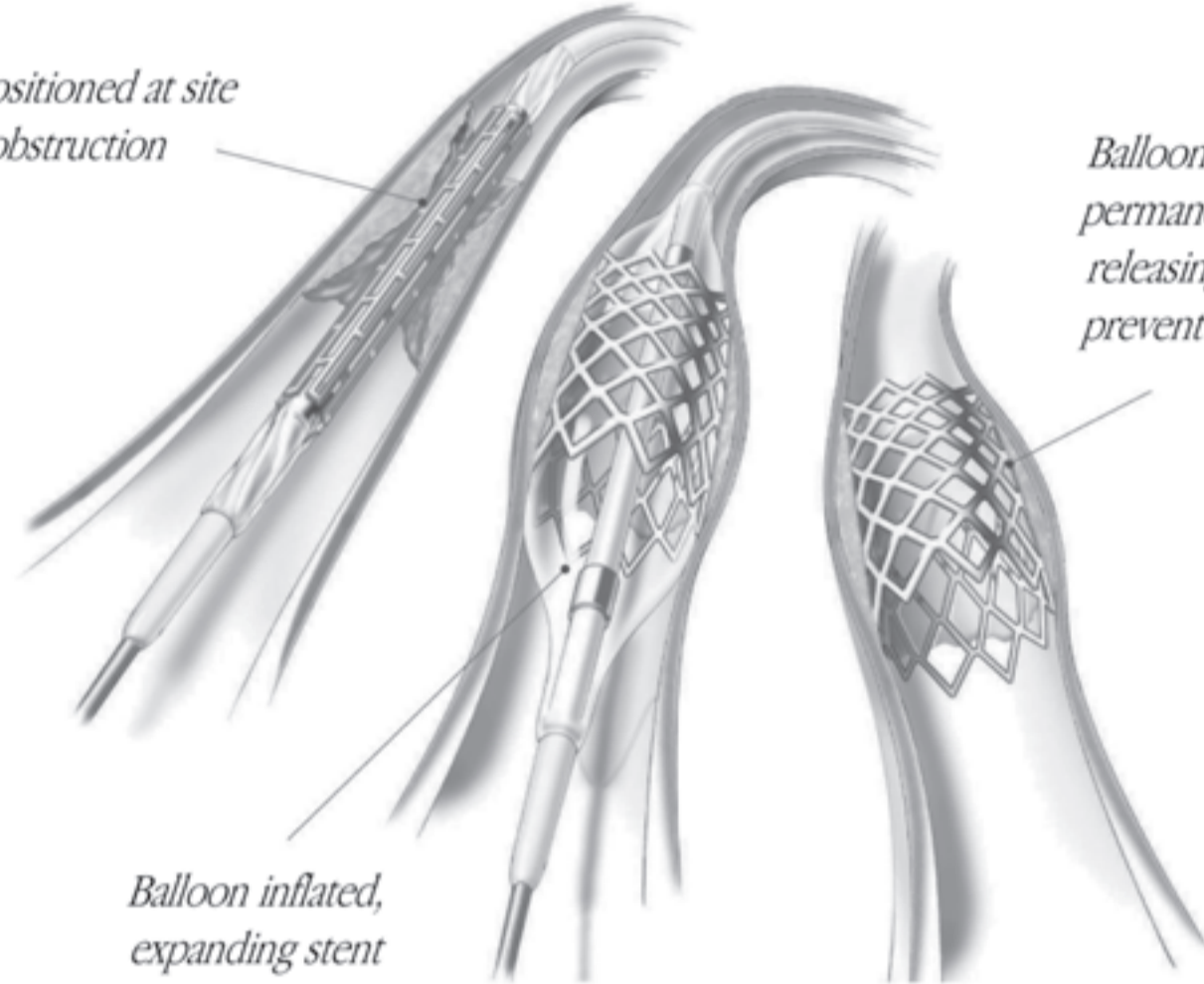
"We are grateful to various high-ranking government officials for their efforts. I would also like to thank our colleagues at the Philippine National Red Cross Society, in particular its Chairman Richard Gordon, for their unwavering support during this difficult time," said Aeschlimann. ■

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