No respite for troops in Vagni rescue

by ROEL PAREÑO
Philstar.com

ZAMBOANGA CITY– Security forces had no respite to watch the bout between Manny Pacquiao and British slugger Ricky Hatton last May 2 (May 3 in the Philippines) as they continued the search and rescue operation for the last Red Cross worker held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu.

"There's no stopping for our security force. As a matter of fact there's a continuing effort," Sulu police provincial director Senior Superintendent Julasirim Kasim said.

"We might (have) missed the bout but we have a mission to do," Kasim added.

Even as the military installed a wide screen in an open public plaza for public viewing of the Pacquiao-Hatton fight, government troops and policemen are discreetly carrying out their mission to search and rescue Italian Eugenio Vagni who has been held hostage for months by the Abu Sayyaf.

Kasim revealed a "timeline of the departure of forces" but refused to elaborate on the operation for security reasons.

Vagni is the last of three workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) seized by the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu on Jan. 15.

He has been in captivity for more than three months after his colleagues, Swiss Andreas Notter and Filipino Mary Jean Lacaba, walked to their freedom last month.

The government has put up a P500,000 reward for anyone who could provide information on the whereabouts of Vagni and his captors.

Vagni's health reportedly is getting poorer due to his hernia and he could hardly move around.

This prompted security forces to intensify efforts to locate and rescue Vagni.

Officials said the kidnappers split into small groups in an effort to evade pursuing government forces.

Several military and police operations also yielded reports that showed Vagni is no longer being held by the main group led by Abu Sayyaf leader Albader Parad.

Close to 2,000 civilian volunteers have joined the search, some were former guerrillas, for the hunt against the kidnappers.

Kasim did not elaborate on whether security forces have already located Vagni and his captors.

A security official earlier revealed troops were able to locate the kidnappers keeping Vagni in their jungle lair in Mt. Tukay, Indanan town.

It was the same area where the bandits have kept the Italian and his two other colleagues.

The security official revealed Vagni is now in the custody of Abu Sayyaf leader Umbra Jumdail alias Dr. Abu Pula.

No proof virus spreading in sustained way

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alert to 5 on April 29, and may move to the highest level. Stage 6 would signal a pandemic and alert governments to enact plans against the disease.

According to Ira Longini, a researcher at University of Washington in Seattle, the infection is already at pandemic level. "The definition of a pandemic is that the new virus has spread to several countries and is transmissible," Longini said.

'Mild, self-limited illness'

Mexico, the epicenter of the epidemic, has reported 101 estimated deaths, 17 confirmed; the United States, one death, at least 141 confirmed cases; Canada, 35 confirmed cases; the United Kingdom, 13 confirmed cases; Germany, 4 confirmed cases; France and South Korea, 2 confirmed cases; The Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark and Hong Kong, confirmed one case each.

China imposed the first quarantine arrivals from Mexico after a man on a flight from Mexico was found suffering from swine flu. The man flew to Hong Kong via Shanghai on, and was admitted to hospital. Beijing put his fellow passengers under week-long observation. It also suspended flights from Mexico.

In Mexico itself, the government shut down for a week restaurants, public buildings and businesses to try to bring the virus under control, putting the country at a standstill. Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrad said the emergency measures were bringing results, "with the numbers getting fewer every day."

Virus can be more deadly

Dr. Anne Schuchat, acting deputy director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said that although experts were concerned about the possibility of severe cases, the majority so far had been "mild, self-limited illness."

Since mid-April, world health authorities have tracked the emergence of swine flu, technically known as H1N1, from a few cases in Texas and California to the brink of the first influenza pandemic since 1968.

US President Barack Obama warned at the weekend that "even if it turns out that the H1N1 is relatively mild on the front end, it could come back in a more virulent form during the flu season."

The new influenza strain is a conglomeration of genes from swine, bird and human viruses, according to Willian Schaffner, an influenza expert at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tennessee.

The strain "poses the biggest threat of flu pandemic since 2003, when H5N1 killed millions of birds and hundreds of people. The 2003 avian flu killed more than half of the people who got it. It didn't spread from person to person and only infected 421 people.

The Spanish flu of 1918, another version of bird flu, killed 50 million people in one of history's deadliest outbreaks.

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