

RP for impartial probe into new rape charges

by CYNTHIA BALANA
Inquirer.net

THE Presidential Commission on the Visiting Forces Agreement on Thursday called for an impartial investigation into allegations by a 22-year-old university student that she was raped by an American soldier.

"It is unfortunate that this issue is being reported just now, one month after the alleged incident took place," Undersecretary Edilberto Adan, who heads the commission, said in a statement sent to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

Adan said the commission will coordinate with the police. "It is the right of any crime victim to file a complaint with police authorities, and it is the duty of the police to conduct an impartial investigation. Rape is a serious crime," Adan said.

"It is important that due process is observed and the rights of all concerned are respected. We also urge everyone concerned to cooperate with the authorities so an impartial investigation could take place," he added.

The woman, identified to the media only as "Vanessa" to protect her real identity, claimed said the rape happened last April 19 inside a hotel in Makati City.

The militant women's group Gabriela said in statement that it was able to confirm that the man was a US soldier listed in hotel register as being "from Joint US Military Assistance Group (Jusmag)/Balikatan." ■

Pagasa: Rainy season is here

by HELEN FLORES
Philstar.com

GET your umbrellas read—the rainy season is here.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) yesterday officially declared the onset of the rainy season in the western section of the Philippines, which includes the Ilocos Region, Central Luzon, Southern Tagalog, Metro Manila and Western Visayas.

Pagasa weather forecaster Nonoy About said the southwest monsoon is now the prevailing wind system in the country.

"Despite the onset of the rainy season, we cannot expect torrential rains in the coming days because the southwest wind flow is still weak," About said.

About said all the criteria for declaring the rainy season have been met, including a 25-millimeter rainfall requirement and a southwest monsoon that should

be the prevailing wind system.

He said the early migration of the intertropical convergence zone (ITCZ) is enhancing the southwest wind flow over the western and southern parts of the country.

Meanwhile, Pagasa said breaks in rain periods could be expected before the normal peak of the rainy season in July and August.

About said at least 10 tropical cyclones are likely to enter the country between June and September.

About said Metro Manila will experience partly cloudy skies with isolated rainshowers and thunderstorms especially during the afternoon and evening.

Northern and Central Luzon will have mostly cloudy skies with scattered rainshowers.

The rest of the country will have partly cloudy skies with isolated rainshowers and thunderstorms. ■

MILITARY OFFICIAL:

All 'Balikatan' funds accounted for

by JOCELYN UY
Inquirer.net

AN initial probe into the allegations of a Navy junior officer that a retired general and other military officers pocketed over P40 million in Balikatan funds in 2007 showed that all of the money has been accounted, a military spokesman said.

Lieutenant Colonel Romeo Brawner Jr. said the military's inspector general and the internal audit revisited pertinent documents and found out that the entire P46 million disbursed to Filipino troops during the RP-US Balikatan exercise two years ago was properly managed.

Navy Lieutenant Nancy Gadian accused retired Lieutenant General Eugenio Cedo, then chief of the Western Mindanao Command, of using the month-long RP-US Balikatan exercises as a "milking cow."

He said the AFP will conduct a full-blown investigation only if Gadian files a formal complaint enumerating all people involved in the alleged misuse of the Balikatan funds. ■

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DoH: Put 'graphic warning' on cigar packs

Urges Congress to pass legislation

by ANNA VALMERO
Inquirer.net

ORIENTAL MINDORO—The Department of Health (DOH) urged Congress to pass immediately the bill mandating that picture-based health warnings be placed on half of the packaging of tobacco products, a health official said.

"We urge both chambers of Congress to discuss the bill in plenary and pass it because the Philippines ratified and signed the FCTC provisions on tobacco control," Asuncion Anden of the DOH's National Center for Health Promotion said in a forum Wednesday.

She was referring to the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in which the Philippines, as a signatory, should have passed a law supporting the mandate in September 2008.

"Why are images of health warning important? A picture of a health warning will convey a message that will bring out less confusion with words. Take for example the warning: 'Smoking causes cancer.' Not all people can read and not everyone who has read something has the same understanding of what they read. Ipakita ang totoo sa pakete (Show the truth of tobacco ills in picture warnings)," said Anden.

The packaging of tobacco products in our country only includes text warnings while those we export to Thailand, for example, include picture-based health messages, she added.

"We are glad to say that the Philippines is a tobacco exporter and follows regulations of other countries but in our country, bakit wala (why is there none)?" asked Anden.

When Senator Pia Cayetano chaired the committee on health, the reading for the bill went through smooth sailing but when the Senate leadership changed and the committee was handled by Senator Loren Legarda, it seemed Legarda was not anymore interested in pushing for the bill, said Anden.

The North bloc in the House of Representatives reportedly opposes the lobby for the bill's passage because of the lack of "alternative livelihood" programs for the tobacco farmers or traders who have been benefiting from the P2-million industry, said Anden.

As a country in the Southeast Asian region, the Philippines is being eyed as an emerging market for tobacco use because it is

already a sunset or mature industry in the West, said Anden.

"Worldwide, one person dies from exposure to tobacco smoke every six minutes and the tobacco industry is targeting the non-smoking youth to replace the consumers who die. The incidence of picking up the habit is increasing due to the perception that smoking is cool and they are enticed by glossy advertising from manufacturers," said Anden.

Anden lamented that while 90 percent of Filipinos are aware of the ills of tobacco use, it has not been translated into behavior.

She said they plan to tap the youth to advocate tobacco control and possibly create another mascot, like "Yosi Kadiri," which showed tobacco ills explicitly and had memory recall among the people.

In July 2002, the Philippines passed Republic Act 9211 to regulate the packaging, use, sale and distribution, and advertisements of tobacco products and for other purposes but "implementation is not yet full blown."

"It is a very good law—that promoted smoke-free areas, informed the public on tobacco-related diseases, banned all tobacco advertisement and sponsorship and protected the youth from the smoking habit—but it had loopholes," said Anden.

The local law mandated the removal of huge billboards advertising cigarette products except in point-of-sale (POS) or stores selling the products. However, manufacturers "found a way to go around the law" by distributing signs, posters or calendars featuring cigarette advertisement on the side, said Anden.

"For the tobacco industry, POS is the entire premise of the store—but the moment you advertise outside the store, that is against the law," said Anden.

Anden cited that while billboards in Makati City, Silang town in Cavite province and Davao City don't display tobacco products, "the battleground is so vast."

As part of its campaign against cigarette smoking, the DoH is inviting the youth to attend a free concert featuring anti-smoking bands like Hale, SinoSikat and Itchyworms at the Quirino Grandstand in Quezon City on May 31, with a walk-for-a-cause in the morning. ■

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