

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Filipina Red Cross worker freed

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Lacaba's release on television but did not elaborate.

Lacaba was released by the Abu Sayyaf around 7:15pm but no information was immediately available on her two companions, Swiss Andreas Notter and Italian Eugenio Vagni, according to a source who was not authorized to speak to media.

Lacaba was freed in Barangay Paligi, a village bordering Indanan and Parang towns, according an informant, who has direct knowledge of the release.

The informant said Lacaba was handed over to Sulu Vice Governor Nuranna Sahidulla, who went near Paligi after having been told by Congressman Yusop Jikiri to go there.

"(She was released) somewhere near the Barangay of Paligi, it's a fishing village just adjacent to Barangay Kuppong, and Vice Governor Nuranna Sahidulla was already notified by Sulu Congressman Yusop Jikiri to secure her from the area," the source said.

Sahidulla, he said, was escorted by Brigadier General Eugene Clemen, commander of the 3rd Marine Brigade.

The informant said the Abu

Sayyaf group that handed her over was led by Abdul Gafur who could not be contacted despite repeated attempts.

"The governor (Sakur Tan) has no knowledge about all these things here, in fact he was surprised about the report," the source added.

"She's fine and she is undergoing medical treatment," Serapio said without elaborating.

Serapio said that Lacaba would immediately be brought to this city "first thing early in the morning tomorrow (Friday)."

But a source from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said they wanted to get hold of her as soon as they could.

"And we are not going to allow any agencies from the Philippine government to conduct the debriefing, it's a policy of the ICRC that the debriefing will be done by the ICRC," the source said.

The ICRC informant said Lacaba was expected to be flown out of the country soon.

Cedric Piralla, ICRC head of delegation in Davao City, where Lacaba came from, said they could only confirm her release if they saw her.

"I am sorry but I cannot confirm or deny if Mary Jean is free, we need to see her in person," Piralla said.

As of posting time, Lacaba is undergoing check up and debriefing at the marine camp, said assistant secretary for public affairs Brian Yamsuan of the Department of Interior and Local Government in a phone interview.

Yamsuan said they have yet to contact the kidnappers again on whether Vagni and Notter would be released soon.

Clemen, officer-in-charge of the Joint Task Force Comet, in a separate interview with Inquirer.net said that Lacaba was now at the hospital of the 3rd Marine Brigade in Sulu.

Fadzlor Raman, spokesman of the Task Force ICRC crisis committee, said that Lacaba was in good and healthy condition.

It has been 78 days since the three Red Cross workers have been held captive by the Abu Sayyaf in the province of Sulu.

Task Force ICRC, headed by Sulu Governor Tan, was the multi-agency team that has been negotiating for the release of the hostages who were seized January 15. ■

Pacquiao, Hatton shine on the red carpet

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Most boxing pundits and analysts are predicting a Pacquiao win. Many of the pundits, after watching Pacquiao's dismantling of Oscar De La Hoya with speed and relentlessness believe that Hatton's slow and power style lends itself for an easy Pacquiao victory. Even Pacquiao's trainer Freddie Roach is predicting a quick and easy 3rd round knockout.

"If he fights like he has in the past, bullying in, Manny is going to knock him out," said Roach.

However, Hatton and his trainer Floyd Mayweather Sr. said that Pacquiao is vulnerable to damaging attacks especially to the body.

Mayweather Sr., who was booed during the introduction by the primarily pro-Pacquiao crowd at the Roosevelt, said that he's convinced if Pacquiao comes charging in as he has in so many fights, Hatton will take him down.

"He's [Pacquiao] been shaken up before," said the loquacious Mayweather Sr. to the *Asian Journal*. "He's the only guy [who is] going to go backwards in this fight. You watch Pacquiao, and

he makes a lot of mistakes defensively. I predict a body shot will get him."

Mayweather Sr., who once trained De La Hoya, still does not give credit to Pacquiao for beating his former protégé.

"I wasn't part of that fight," said Mayweather Sr., who declined to train De La Hoya for the Pacquiao fight because he focused training Hatton. "What Pacquiao did was beat a shell of De La Hoya."

Hatton said that Pacquiao need to be aware of his power and his newfound speed. At times, Hatton seemed frustrated and defensive by a number of reporters who question the Englishman's speed, or lack thereof inside the ring.

"They [the boxing pundits] said I wasn't going to out jab Paulie [Malignaggi]," said Hatton of his win against the New Yorker Malignaggi. "But I out speeded him and out jabbed him in the fight. Just look at the numbers."

Hatton added that training with Mayweather Sr. has helped him in the speed department.

"I invite all of you to watch me train," he said. "Just see how fast I am, how explosive I

am and with better head movement now."

"Manny is quite easy to hit," Hatton continued. "He's been shaken up a few times in his last fights. I hope he's improved. I hope his body and chin [has improved] has because he's going to be fighting the biggest man he's ever fought before."

"It'll surprise you to see how fast I am," said Hatton.

Pacquiao gave a quick laugh when a reporter asked him about Hatton's speed.

"All I can say is that speed will be part of this fight," said Pacquiao. "What I know is that I'm faster than him but he believes he's faster than me so what can I do?"

With about five weeks remaining until the fight, Pacquiao and Hatton are preparing for what may be a historic match.

A win for Pacquiao would net him a fourth world title in a fourth different weight division. Hatton would finally be considered for the pound-4-pound champion title.

Neither man is going to back down. No matter what happens on May 2, boxing fans are only expecting one thing—a Hollywood ending. ■

LWUA's Pichay...

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"Under PD 198, watershed areas should be entrusted to us for us to protect and reforest, and that's exactly what we intend to do. We will also be helping to save water districts from high interest rates when getting loans from various credit facilities," he added.

Aside from the establishment of Water Bank, Pichay also plans to reduce red tape at LWUA and discourage water rate increases in his five-year term as LWUA administrator.

"I expect to be able to serve round 30 to 40 million Filipinos when I complete my five-year stint with the LWUA in 2013," Pichay shared.

Pichay, also disclosed that the country needs an estimated P450 billion to fully develop its water resources and supply systems to include provision for filtration and treatment. He

said that the establishment of the bank would help augment the government's annual budgetary appropriations for water supply.

LWUA is currently serving 612 water districts in the country but still 755 municipalities have no water systems.

Pichay said the plan is to establish 50 additional water districts until 2010.

The LWUA is responsible for the government's potable water projects nationwide and extends credit and financial assistance for various projects in water districts, which include engineering studies and design improvement.

LWUA was previously under the Department of Public Works and Highways, but President Gloria Arroyo transferred it to the Department of Health last August 2008. ■

From hospitals to hospitality

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In 2008, for instance, 100,000 foreign patients with an estimated spending power of US\$350 million sought either medical or cosmetic treatment in the Philippines. Patients from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East often save 50 to 70 percent on their expenses.

And even as the costs of airfare and accommodation are added to the hospital bill, the expenses incurred are still very minimal. The average cost of seeking treatment in destinations like the Philippines ranges from \$20,000 to \$70,000, a far cry from the price of medical treatment in the West.

Patients avail of the most innovative procedures in the country at a fraction of the price, and this, at the same time, boosts the Philippines' medical and tourism sectors.

Durano predicts that in five to 10 years, the industry will be "ten times bigger than what it is today."

"[Health tourism] just requires a little push and the moment it gains momentum, it will have a life of its own," he added.

Tourism Usec. Cynthia Carrion also shared her forecast, "If we continue what we started, by 2012, we'll have as much as \$3 billion."

The world's best

Health tourism places Philippine medical and cosmetic treatment on equal footing with the world's best. The 4th World Health Tourism Congress, which was recently hosted by the Philippines, steers the country in the right direction.

"It's just one of those sectors where we have that natural competitiveness," Durano said.

Filipinos, after all, comprise the thousands of health care professionals working all over the world. The Philippines is proving it is indeed a force to reckon with. The country's top hospitals and wellness clinics converged with international medical tourism providers to address patients' hospital and travel needs.

Nurturing, healing

Other Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Thailand have made their mark as pioneers in the industry, since the advent of medical tourism in the late 90s.

It is, however, the nurturing character of the *Pinoy* that carves out the Philippines' niche in the global health tourism market. The Filipino culture of nurturance, according to Durano, "humanizes medicine."

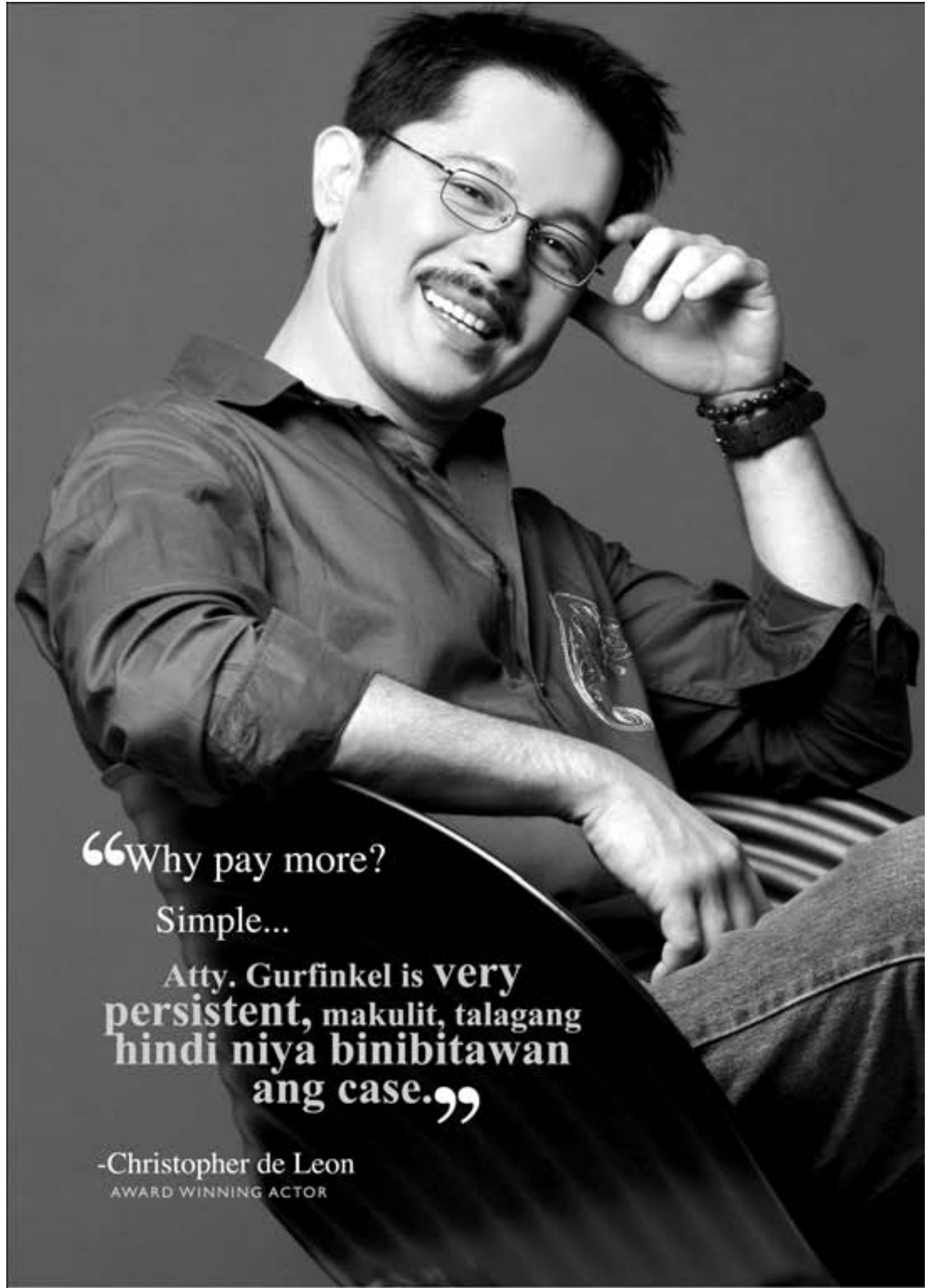
Carrion also believes the Filipino idea of wellness is holistic and spiritual.

"When a Filipino massages you with the *hilot*, it's not only a relaxing massage, it's also therapeutic. It's healing you," she explained.

"They come here and after vacationing they come back and they look younger," Carrion added.

Beyond the usual postcard idea of relaxing in a tropical destination, health tourism sets foreign patients and *balikbayans* on the road to wellness faster, as the experience is immersed in the nurturance and prayerfulness of Filipinos.

And as the undersecretary pointed out, "We have to let the world know about it." ■



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