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Free De La Cruz, Withdraw the Philippine Troops

While driving a truckload of crude oil from neighboring Saudi Arabia to Iraq, Mr. Angelo de la Cruz, 46, a Filipino and married to Mrs. Arsenia de la Cruz with 8 children was abducted last week by Khaled Ibn al-Walid Brigade, a group linked with the militant Islamic Army in Iraq.

Unless the Philippine government withdraws its troops from a war-torn country of Iraq on July 20, 2004 -- the new timetable set by the Iraqi abductors, they are threatening to behead De La Cruz like what they did with the American and South Korean victims after their governments refused the rebels' demands. Politically, the withdrawal of the Philippine contingent is a symbolic blow against the US-led coalition in Iraq.

In videotape broadcast by Al-Jazeera television last July 10, De La Cruz appealed to Philippine government saying, "*To President Gloria Arroyo, please withdraw the Philippine soldiers from Iraq.*"

Mr. Gilberto Asuque, the official spokesperson of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said there were no plans to withdraw the 51 Philippine soldiers and policemen on July 20 deadline. The Philippine government will be faithful to its commitment to stay in Iraq until August 20, which goes without saying the withdrawal of the Philippine troops were not exactly in compliance with the demands of the Iraqi kidnappers.

Mr. Asuque added that after the withdrawal, "*our future actions shall be guided by the United Security Council decision as embodied in Resolution 1546, which defines the role of the UN and its members in the future of Iraq,*" the DFA said without elaborating.

Meanwhile, political pressures have been mounting against President Gloria-Macapagal Arroyo to recall the troops, while friends and relatives have been expressing dismay at the government. GMA ordered a news blackout on the hostage taking, as the government raced against time to free De La Cruz.

Staunch activists have protested near the presidential palace accusing Arroyo of misleading the public concerning the immediate release of De la Cruz last Saturday. In defense of GMA, a Philippine senior diplomat admitted that he misinterpreted the whole thing as an Arab-speaking gentleman gave him wrong interpretation on the immediate release of De la Cruz.

"*The family is tense right now. We are saddened by the turn of events,*" a brother of the hostage told Agence France-Presse, his voice quivering with emotion before he left for Jordan together with the wife of the hostage and Philippine Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas last July 11 Sunday on a mission to appeal with the abductors. "*Jordan is the nearest place where a possible release can happen*" Sto. Tomas said.

In the light of the risk it creates for thousands of Filipino overseas workers in the Middle East, a Catholic bishop urged the government to reconsider its involvement in the United States' war against terrorism.

Bishop Deogracias Iñiguez, head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Committee on Public Affairs, said "the hostage-taking of De la Cruz is a sign that a policy shift on terrorism should be made." He added, "I think it is a very valid opportunity for us especially for the policy makers of the land to reconsider"

CBCP President Fernando Capalla appealed to the public for prayers and safety of truck driver Angelo de la Cruz. He said, "We join his family, his province mates, and the entire nation in storming heavens that he be spared this ultimate cruelty. We also pray for his tormentors, that the Lord will soften their hearts so that they will release Angelo." Capalla added, "Let us turn to God and through the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace, ask him to bring peace to Iraq and to its people."

Malaysian foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar appealed for the "immediate unconditional release of all hostages including a national from the Philippines being held in Iraq." He said Malaysia, which chairs the 57-member Organization of Islamic Conference, "does not condone such acts as it threatens the lives of innocent civilians and humanitarian workers."

Similarly, OIC members from Indonesia, Libya and Egypt had all agreed to help in the negotiations to free the captive, officials have said.

As of July 13, 2004, the Philippine government has issued official statement that it will withdraw Filipino troops from Iraq. However, the Philippine government did not indicate when it would carry out its plan.

CALL TO ACTION

The **Center for Social Concern and Action (COSCA)** of the De La Salle University-Manila and the **District Justice and Peace Commission (DJPC)** are inviting the Lasallian Family and like-minded citizens, who have a genuine concern for the country to unite and work actively for the protection of human rights and the promotion of active non-violence.

WE DENOUNCE in the strongest possible terms the abduction of Mr. Angelo de la Cruz.

WE DEMAND the immediate and unconditional release of Mr. Angelo de la Cruz and all other hostages of war in the name of peace and social justice.

WE DEMAND the Philippine government to withdraw all Filipino troops and all forms of support to the US invasion of Iraq.

WE SUPPORT the stand of Bishop Deogracias Iñiguez, head of CBCP Committee on Public Affairs that the hostage taking of De la Cruz is a clear sign from God that a policy shift on terrorism should be made.

WE JOIN the family of Mr. Angelo de la Cruz and the Filipino people in their fervent prayers for his safety return and to bring peace to the people of the Philippines and Iraq.

**VOX POPULI,
VOX DEI**

*The Voice of the
People is the
Voice of GOD*

*Let us listen to
God's Voice*

No to WAR! Yes to PEACE!

WITHDRAW the Philippine Troops!

SAVE THE LIFE OF A FILIPINO!