

### **3 cops freed after 83 days in NPA captivity**

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MANILA, Philippines — The communist New People's Army (NPA) on Friday released three policemen that the rebels had been holding as "prisoners of war" since capturing them in an ambush in Rodriguez town, outside Manila, almost three months ago.

Insp. Rex Cuntapay, Police Officer-1 Marvin Agasen and Police Officer-1 Alberto Umali were released at a little past noon amid heavy rain in Macabud, a hilly part of Rodriguez in Rizal province.

A civilian group that included Rizal Governor Casimiro Ynares III, Rodriguez Mayor Pedro Cuerpo, Bishop Gabriel Reyes of the Antipolo diocese, Sen. Jamby Madrigal, and representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross hiked more than an hour uphill for the turnover that lasted no more than five minutes and involved the two parties signing the NPA's so-called "order of release."

The three captives were then reunited with their families who were waiting in an area further downhill.

The soldiers did not exhibit any untoward signs of their 83-day ordeal. They were laughing, were clean-shaven, sported new haircuts and wore clean fatigue uniforms.

Cuntapay said the rebels had treated them well.

"What we found really difficult were the long walks when it was raining hard," he said, adding that he considered their capture and imprisonment as just part of their work.

Cuntapay's wife Joyce also said that what happened was part of her husband's sworn duty to safeguard the community. She said she was grateful to the people who helped in the negotiations for the release of the three.

#### **'Cooperative'**

Ka Ambrosio, the leader of the NPA custodial team, said their prisoners had been cooperative, even during the rebel group's operations.

"The welfare of the three was closely checked," he said.

About three hours after their release, the three policemen were presented at a press conference in the Rizal provincial capitol, with Ynares, Madrigal and Chief Supt. Perfecto Palad, the Calabarzon police chief.

They were not allowed to speak at the 15-minute press conference and were quickly spirited out of the briefing room by their escorts.

Palad said the three policemen would be undergoing a medical checkup and debriefing.

Agasen's wife, Barbara, who is four months pregnant, said she learned of her husband's release from a news flash report.

### **Thanks to negotiators**

"I count not join Joyce [Cuntapay's wife] and Grace [Umali's wife] at the turnover because of my condition. We're all very happy. Thank God, it's now over," she said in a phone interview.

She also thanked the people who helped in securing the freedom of her husband.

"We owe so much to the negotiators," she said.

"The whole family is so excited," she said.

Cuntapay, Umali and Agasen were captured last Jan. 3 when they went to investigate reports that rebels had burned a dump truck in Rodriguez. The three were forced to surrender after they ran out of bullets in a gun battle in which one policeman and two others were wounded.

Their captors, the NPA Narciso Antazo Aramil Command, said they would be set free once they had been "cleared of crimes against the people" and the revolutionary movement.

Ynares, who acted as the lead negotiator for their release, thanked both the military and the NPA for "bending over backwards" to accommodate each other's requests, leading to the safe release of the three officers.

He also cited the roles of Madrigal, Reyes and Tarlac provinces' Governor Vic Yap.

Madrigal's chief of staff, Gary Jimenez, said the senator had acted as a "facilitator."

He said the National Democratic Front, the political arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines, had contacted the senator two weeks ago and informed her about the NPA's decision to free the three policemen.

Jimenez said that Madrigal and the NDF had established a "cordial relationship" in recent years, and that she twice signed with the group a joint communiqué calling for the resumption of the stalled peace talks.

In a phone interview, a tired but jubilant Madrigal said the successful release of the captives was the result of "long, long negotiations."

“The success of this endeavor came because we were discreet and very quiet. Very few people knew about it. Politics did not come into play because too many cooks spoil the broth. This was cooked by very few cooks who never talked about it,” she said.

She said the captives were turned over “in very good condition.”

Asked why the NDF would go to her, Madrigal said she was the chair of the Senate committee on peace and unification, and a major advocate of the resumption of the stalled peace negotiations.

### **Limited press coverage**

“I think they’re comfortable with me because I put politics aside. You see there’s very limited press coverage. Even my closest assistant did not know when I left my house early this morning,” she said.

Madrigal said she had been visiting the headquarters of the National Democratic Front (NDF) in Utrecht, the Netherlands, for several years now.

She said the release was a “sign of goodwill on the part of the NDF. They did not ask for a ransom, for anything in return.”

She said the NDF was hoping that this gracious act would convince the government to resume the talks.

### **Letter of apology**

Marilyn “Ka Hannah” Anayat, the former NPA member who participated in the ambush and capture of three police officers, sent a letter of apology to the released officers and their families.

“I can’t blame you if you’re angry with me. I know it will be hard for you to forgive the people who made you their prisoners,” she said in her letter, a copy of which was furnished the Inquirer.

She blamed their ordeal and suffering on the Narciso Antazo Aramil Command operating in Rizal province, of which she was once a member.

Anayat said she too had been victim of “communist lies.”

According to a military report, Anayat was wounded by her own comrades during the gun battle that resulted in the capture of the three policemen.

Several days later, authorities discovered her when she went for treatment at the Lourdes Hospital in Sta. Mesa, Manila.

She was temporarily treated in a Camp Crame hospital and later ordered transferred to a military hospital in Tanay, Rizal, by the court.

She is still staying in the camp and has rejected calls by human rights group to turn her back on the military. *With reports from Delfin T. Mallari Jr. and Maricar Cinco, and DJ Yap*