

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr. (PDP-Laban) today urged the government to throw the book at the Ampatuans for their involvement in the massacre of more-than 60 innocent individuals by filing murder charges against them and immediately suspending them from their government posts.

Senator Pimentel, however, told President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo not to pass the buck to Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno in suspending Maguindanao Governor Andal Ampatuan, Sr. and other members of his clan who are occupying the posts of mayors and other local-government positions in the province.

Mr. Pimentel noted that Secretary Puno has already recommended to the President the suspension of Governor Ampatuan and other clan members. But the President, instead of acting on the recommendation, gave Secretary Puno full authority to exercise administrative control over the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, of which Maguindanao is one of the five component provinces.

This means Secretary Puno is empowered to carry out his own recommendation to suspend all local officials in the ARMM who may have a hand in the mass murder.

Written by Senator Pimentel's Press Office

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Senator Pimentel said Mr. Puno cannot legally assume such supervisory authority and approve any suspension order because the Local Government Code (Republic Act 7160) has stripped the Department of Interior and Local Government of the authority to exercise administrative supervision over the local-government units.

“The President’s directive to Secretary Puno is anomalous. Unfortunately, Mr. Puno has no more authority to suspend erring local government officials. That has been removed from the DILG secretary since the Local Government Code took effect in 1991,” he said.

Under the Code, he said the only authority left with the DILG is to supervise the Philippine National Police, pointed out Senator Pimentel, the principal author of RA 7160.

{xtypo_quote} Gloria Arroyo does not want to offend the Ampatuans. She is worried that the massive fraud perpetrated by the Ampatuans in conspiracy with election and law enforcement officials will be exposed” – Sen. Nene Pimentel {/xtypo_quote}

Senator Pimentel voiced the suspicion that President Arroyo purposely refrains from discharging her disciplinary powers because she is avoiding a direct clash with the Gov. Ampatuan and other members of his clan on account of their role in her victory in the 2004 presidential elections which was made possible through “command” votes and rampant fraud in Maguindanao.

He said the wholesale cheating was repeated in the 2007 senatorial elections which saw the administration senatorial bets winning by a landslide in Maguindanao while their opposition counterparts were robbed of votes with some of them being credited with zero votes in certain towns which was statistically impossible.

“Gloria does not want to offend the Ampatuans. She is worried that the massive fraud perpetrated by the Ampatuans in conspiracy with election and law enforcement officials will be exposed,” the minority leader said.

Senator Pimentel said the government should stop dilly dallying about charging and arresting Governor Ampatuan on the basis of strong circumstantial evidence implicating him in the mass murder.

He said the Maguindanao governor should be held liable on the following grounds:

1. The hundreds or so civilian militia who took part in abducting and executing the members of the rival Mangudadatu family, members of the media and other innocent victims were under the control of the governor.

2. The backhoe used in digging the gravesite of the murdered victims bore the name the provincial government of Maguindanao and the name of Governor Ampatuan.

3. Some witnesses have reportedly attested to the governor's involvement in the mass murder.

4. Governor Ampatuan did not take any step to stop the carnage or to call on military, police or medical authorities to save the lives of the victims. # # #

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