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Masbate in a state of political calamity—Gonzales

THE probability of putting Masbate under the control of the Commission on Elections during the current electoral season loomed yesterday after Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales described the province as being “in a state of a man-made disaster.”

Gonzales made his initial assessment of the province after visiting it Friday this week as part of the defense and military establishments’ campaign to help Comelec ensure clean and peaceful voting in May, particularly in known election hot spots. Gonzales was joined in his Masbate visit by AFP Army Chief Lt. Gen. Delfin Bangit and Southern Luzon Command commander Lt. Gen. Roland Detabali.

Gonzales said the Armed Forces in Bicol and the Special Task Force Masbate of the Philippine National Police, in their situation briefing, painted a picture of “a province where lawlessness is king” and that of a “terrorized community.” The defense chief noted that there has been a spate of election-related killings in the province in the last few months.

The local state forces have identified 10 private armed groups in the province, four of which have been validated.

Part of the private armed groups in Masbate are moonlighting New People’s Army guerillas and, until recently, legitimate forces of government. In response to the politicians’ “privatization” of state security elements, the provincial PNP has been revamped and “cleaned” of partisan elements.

Special Task Force Masbate and the AFP local command also reported that the politicians in Masbate are now “in massive expansion of (their) armed groups” in view of the forthcoming electoral contests.

The PNP special task force is expecting heavy importation of armed men from other areas including mainland Bicol, Metro Manila, Iloilo and as far as Mindanao by the politicians “because they can no longer use legitimate forces of government.”

Some of the armed groups, according to the report of the PNP task force, have the capability to use landmines or improvised explosive devices.

“Another disturbing part of the report is that even prisoners are used for criminal activities. And if they remain in Masbate, they can be used for partisan purposes in the coming election,” Gonzales noted.

According to the report, the jails don’t even have semblance of a prison as they have no perimeter fences and nipa huts take the place of prison cells. Masbate has two provincial jails keeping a total of some 200 prisoners.

Gonzales said the local AFP and PNP reports described a “paralysis of the criminal justice system” in the province. “They say that the law enforcement in the province is highly politicized and even the prosecution and judiciary are politicized or under extreme pressure.”

Speacial Task Force Masbate’s efforts toward dismantling the private armed groups have resulted in the arrest of a total of 14 armed persons and the confiscation of eight high-powered and three other firearms.

Gonzales noted, however, that the Task Force complained of having had extreme difficulty obtaining and serving search warrants.

“The situation now in Masbate reminds me of Maguindanao,” the defense chief said.

The defense chief ordered the AFP to work more closely with the PNP to make Masbate quiet and not allow it to become a war zone or another Maguindanao.

Gonzales emphasized that it would be up to the Comelec whether to put Masbate under its control or not. He brought with him to Masbate the top regional official of Comelec so he could make his recommendation to the electoral body’s top leadership.

Gonzales said he will try holding dialogues with the politicians of the province, as he had done so in Sulu, to get them into a pact for a fair and violence-free election.