

Latest Philippine coup attempt reflects military disenchantment

By Chaitanya Kalbag

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MANILA (Reuter) — The armed forces, the institution that has held the Philippines together over the past year, has emerged at war with itself after Thursday's face-saving end to an insurrection by 400 rebel soldiers, analysts said.

Western diplomats and military experts said last Tuesday's coup attempt and the compromise with its rump of 190 rebels still refusing to lay down their arms had tarnished the image of the military 1987 months after it forced former president Ferdinand Marcos to flee into exile.

The word "surrender" was not mentioned once during a press conference at which Armed Forces Chief Fidel Ramos announced that Col. Oscar Canlas had agreed to end his occupation of a television station in a rebellion against what he termed Communist infiltration of the government.

Although President Corazon Aquino on Tuesday ordered the mutineers to be court-martialed and Justice Minister Nepitali Gonzales Thursday said those convicted could even face the firing squad, Ramos later said talk of courts-martial was premature.

Instead, he said an investigation would establish whether courts-martial were called for.

His conciliatory words seemed only to paper over a deep rift within the ranks of the country's 260,000-man armed forces.

The cigar-puffing Ramos admitted that he had held talks late Wednesday night with a group of about 70 middle-ranking officers even as assault troops ringing Channel 7 fired two desultory volleys of tear gas canisters at Canlas and his men.

Ramos said the meeting had reached a formula for ending the coup attempt.

Host of the colonels and majors Ramos talked to belonged to the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), an ambitious group of activists close to former Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile.

Military sources said the meeting had been stormy and that the officers had threatened to resign en masse.

They said Defense Minister Rafael Ile-

to, who looked grim-faced and unhappy at the news conference, has urged the use of force to crush the revolt.

"Ramos knuckled under. He did not want to have a civil war on his hands," an officer sympathetic to RAM said.

A Western military attache said the incident had undermined Ramos's image as a "Philippine Bonaparte."

He said Ramos, who spent an hour Wednesday pleading with Canlas to surrender, had emerged during the past few months as the linchpin holding Aquino's fragile government together.

Nine months after he and Enrile threw the military behind a civilian revolt against Marcos, Ramos firmly backed Aquino in handling an apparent coup plot that led to Enrile's dismissal.

But in endorsing Aquino's quest for peace with Communists, who have waged an 18-year guerrilla war, Ramos lost the support of hard-line factions within the military, the attache said.

"If there is one thing the military is united over, it is its opposition to the Committee," he added. "Ramos is lucky the coup did not succeed."

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