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32 children released after 10-hour drama

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said she was glad that the children were safe, but added the hostage takers faced the full force of the law.



THE man who held 32 schoolchildren and two teachers hostage inside a bus and stunned millions gave up as promised at 7 p.m. last night, releasing the hostages after 10 hours and relieving officials, who had feared the worst.

Jun Ducat, 60, with an Uzi machine pistol slung around his neck and a grenade in his left hand, opened the bus doors and the children got off one by one, delighting their parents and relatives, who had watched the drama with thousands of people in the heart of the city.

Police led Ducat and his accomplice, Cesar Carbonell, away as they were being escorted by Ilocos Sur Gov. Luis Singson and Senator Ramon Revilla Jr.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said she was glad that the children were safe, but added the hostage takers faced the full force of the law.

"I am ordering speedy prosecution to keep this recidivist from doing it again, and warning others from copycat behavior," she said.

The head of the Manila Police District's Directorial Staff, Senior Supt. Cipriano Querol, said Ducat and his accomplice would be charged with serious illegal detention.

Earlier, Malacañang said a rescue attempt would be made only as a last resort as the hostages' safety was the officials' main concern.

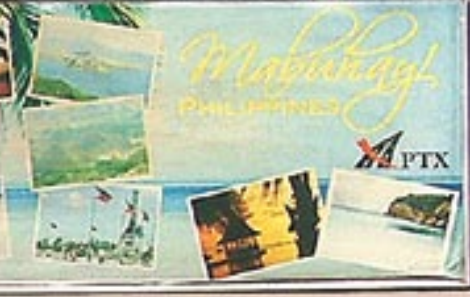
Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said the incident was a big embarrassment for the country, and especially as it happened while Asian publishers, editors and journalists were meeting in Manila.

Ducat, a man with a history of attention-grabbing stunts, took a busload of students and teachers hostage from his day-care center and drove them to Manila City Hall to denounce corruption and demand better lives for the poor children.

The incident dragged on for more than 10 hours. It virtually shut down the capital's main office building, drew thousands of on-lookers, and was beamed live around the world—drawing the type of media coverage that Ducat



ROBERT VIÑAS AND EY ACASIO



Drama in Manila. The children being held as hostages wave from their bus. Ten hours later, a boy (inset) leaves with his classmates as the crisis ended.

US offer \$5-m reward for bomber

THE United States has posted a \$5-million reward for the capture of a Malaysian terror suspect wanted for several bombings in the Philippines, the State Department said Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has authorized a new reward of up to \$5 million

for information leading to the arrest or conviction of Zulkifli bin Hir (a.k.a. Marwan)," the State Department said in a statement.

Zulkifli, described as "a terrorist believed to be involved in multiple deadly bomb attacks in the Philippines," has also been added to the US most-wanted list.

He joins the US' public enemy number one, Osama Bin Laden, mastermind of the Al Qaida network, who has a \$25-million bounty on his head.

Zulkifli is believed to have been in hiding since August 2003 in the Philippines, where he is involved

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Preschoolers' dream trip turns into long nightmare

GEMMA Arroyo was near hysterical as she reached the police line cordoning off the bus in downtown Manila where her six-year-old daughter was among 32 children being held hostage.

"Please, please sir, let our children out," Arroyo wailed as she tried to break through the police line.

She said she had thought her daughter was at a mountain resort, the destination of the pre-school's field trip, when she heard the news.

"They do that every year and

then I saw the hostage drama on television. My heart broke," Arroyo told Agence France-Presse, tears streaming down her face.

Nearby, another terrified mother was screaming hysterically, demanding that police and negotiators do something to get the children freed.

Police cordoned off an entire block around Manila City Hall as anxious parents and relatives tried to make sense of why the head of the pre-school center himself, Jun Ducat, had taken his young charges hostage.

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FAST FACTS

Philippine Forest Cover by Region: 2003 (Area in hectares)

Region	Closed Forests	Open Forests	Man-Plantation Forests	Total Forests
Philippines	2,560,872	4,030,588	347,362	7,168,400
NCR	-	2,790	30	2,820
CAR	384,877	246,848	-	40,595
1	37,723	117,217	151	34,710
2	503,149	604,473	8,602	33,621
3	226,241	304,215	368	58,671
4A	117,162	161,165	11,346	-
4B	484,866	604,246	57,567	48,465
5	50,618	90,284	13,499	2,075
6	105,873	104,686	4,600	49,355
7	2,231	43,026	11,770	17,842
8	36,473	410,111	38,781	34,483
9	29,652	126,790	22,279	3,474
10	107,071	226,400	2,492	1,530
11	177,503	240,986	2,010	536
12	126,385	218,858	1,350	2,641
13	64,729	431,832	26,731	-
ARMM	106,319	96,661	45,786	1,580

Source: Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Palace orders soldiers out of 27 areas in metropolis

MALACAÑANG ordered the defense department to prepare for the withdrawal of 260 soldiers from 27 Metro Manila villages, after the Commission on Human Rights and Catholic bishops questioned their presence.

But Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said there was no deadline for the pullout because the Palace did not want to tie the military's hands over a "tactical matter."

In a letter to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the chairman of the human rights commission, Purificacion Quisumbing, urged the troop pullout from villages in Manila, Quezon City, Caloocan and Taguig.

The commission said the presence of soldiers in civilian communities made residents feel that their freedoms of speech and assembly were being curtailed.

The Catholic bishops added

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More overseas workers contracting AIDS virus

HIV/AIDS is ravaging the country's large overseas work force, posing a long-term threat to a key source of foreign exchange, the health department said

Thirty-five percent of all documented cases of HIV carriers are migrant Filipino workers,

including 42 percent of the newly reported cases in 2006, according to new data released by the department.

The government estimates there were some 11,200 HIV carriers in the Philippines as of December 2005.

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Coca-Cola stays. Coca-Cola Co. chief executive Neville Isdell pays a courtesy call on President Arroyo following the company's announcement that it will stay in Manila. (Story on A6)