Official: Militants to free ICRC worker

by UPI

QUEZON CITY, Philippines -- Islamic militants are ready to release one of three kidnapped aid workers once the Philippines' military moves its troops, a Red Cross official said Thursday.

The announcement came after a commander of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf threatened to behead the hostages if government forces launched a new attack on his group.

Two days of intense jungle clashes had killed at least six militants and three soldiers and injured at least 19 people, officials told The Manila Times.

Sen. Richard Gordon, Philippine National Red Cross chairman, said he brokered the deal over the phone with Abu Sayyaf commander Aldaber Parad, the Times reported.

The group, with reported links to al-Qaida, kidnapped three International Committee of the Red Cross volunteers -- Mary-Jean Lacaba of the Philippines, Eugenio Vagni of Italy and Andreas Notter of Switzerland -- Jan. 15 on the island of Sulu while they were working on a humanitarian water project at the province's prison.

When asked how sure he was that he was really talking to Parad over the phone, Gordon said, "I am sure I was talking to the real Parad," the Times said.

He didn't say which Red Cross worker Abu Sayyaf would free once troops moved away from their encampment in Indanan on Jolo island, 620 miles south of Manila.

But he said he trusted Parad would honor a "gentleman's agreement" the two worked out, the Times said.

Abu Sayyaf is one of several militant Islamic separatist groups engaged in an insurgency for a state independent of the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines.

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