

Manila: No pullbacks without hostages

by UPI

MANILA, Philippines -- The Philippines government says it won't offer kidnappers any pullbacks of troops until the release of more Red Cross hostages is guaranteed.

Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno told reporters Monday that the militant group Abu Sayyaf must offer to trade a hostage if it wants military, police or civilian forces to move back, the Philippine Daily Inquirer reported.

"If there is any request for a pullback that is going to be directed to a release of a hostage, then we are willing to consider that because if what they want is to be able to release the hostages to ensure their own safety, we are willing to bend over backwards to do that," Puno said. "But not pullback or pullout for the sake of pullout."

Abu Sayyaf kidnappers are still holding Swiss Red Cross aid worker Andreas Notter and Italian counterpart Eugenio Vagni. Cell members reportedly contacted government negotiators Sunday to reiterate an April 3 pullout demand, a day after the release of Filipino Red Cross worker Mary Jean Lacaba.

"The areas they are asking to be evacuated are very, very difficult to leave," Puno told the Inquirer. "These are very important military installations," he said, without specifying the areas.

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