

BURNHAM IDENTIFIES FORMER ABU CAPTORS

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Manila Times – by Karl Kaufman, reporter

THE former Abu Sayyaf hostage, Gracia Burnham, on Thursday positively identified six of the eight Abu Sayyaf rebels presented before her during the trial on the May 2001 abduction of Filipino and foreign tourists at the Dos Palmas resort in Palawan.

Facing her former captors the first time since her rescue on June 7, 2002, a composed Burnham pointed to Alhamzer Limbong alias Kosovo, Abdul Azan Diamla, Abu Khari Moctar, Bas Ishmael, Alzen Jandul and Dazid Baize as among those who held her, her husband Martin and 18 other Filipino and foreign tourists in the mountains of Basilan for 14 months.

Martin Burnham and a Filipino nurse, Ediborah Yap, were killed during a military rescue operation for the hostages in Sibuco in Zamboanga del Norte.

Burnham, wearing a flowered skirt, white blouse and black blazer, arrived at 7:55 a.m. at the special courtroom inside the Regional Special Action Unit compound of the National Capital Region Police Office (NCRPO) headquarters in Bicutan, Taguig. She was at the stand in the entire proceedings.

Burnham, however, failed to answer questions about the alleged collusion between military officials and the Abu Sayyaf, which led to the escape of the bandits in a hospital compound in Basilan in June 2001.

The defense lawyers tried to raise the issue of the collusion but the prosecution objected.

"There were objections because it could be irrelevant and inconsistent with the case. It would also clutter the records [of the case] so the judge sustained the objection," State Prosecutor Aristotle Reyes told reporters after the hearing.

State prosecutors and defense lawyers said Burnham "shed some tears" while testifying, particularly when she narrated her husband's death.

"She became emotional when it came to that part about Martin," said Reyes.

The lawyer Pura Calleja, representing Muhamadya Haanja and Maminin Mobassirin, said there is a big chance her clients would be exonerated because Burnham did not positively identify them.

But State Prosecutor Nestor Lazaro said they still have a strong case against the two. The eight members of the Abu Sayyaf, along with 85 others, are facing kidnap-for-ransom and serious illegal detention charges before the Pasig Regional Trial Court.

"How can you remember each of the faces of the around 100 Abu Sayyaf members who came and went during their captivity? You don't expect her to remember them all," Lazaro told reporters.

Calleja said Burnham identified the six as "among those who guarded and guided" them.

Oliver Lozano, counsel for Limbong, said Burnham did not mention the actual participation of his client in the Dos Palmas kidnapping.



Gracia Burnham arrives at the trial of her Abu Sayyaf captors.

He said she identified Limbong only as “the one who gave her candy in Lamitan.”

“My client is identified not as a kidnapper. Mere presence is not enough to indict you,” Lozano said as he maintained that Limbong and Kosovo implicated in the abduction are two different persons.

Security measures were tight at the trial venue. The media were prevented from entering the compound, where the trial was being held.

Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and National Bureau of Investigation provided close-in security to Burnham, and close to 100 police officers guarded the perimeter.

Lazaro said Burnham, a 45-year-old mother of three from Kansas City, was composed during the first part of her testimony, but emotions overcame her when she narrated her husband’s death.

The lawyer Moises de Castro raised the issue of collusion between AFP officials and the Abu Sayyaf, but the prosecution objected and Judge Lorifel Pahimna of the Pasig Regional Trial Court Branch 69 sustained the objection.

The military had expressed hope that Burnham’s testimony would “once and for all clear some doubts” about the alleged collusion, which allowed the escape of Abu Sayyaf bandits, including its leader Khadaffy Janjalani, from a military dragnet on June 2, 2001.

Witnesses said hundreds of Abu Sayyaf bandits, along with 20 hostages seized from Dos Palmas, slipped out of the Dr. Jose Torres Memorial Hospital in Saint Peter’s Church compound in Lamitan, Basilan, which was surrounded by government troops.