

THE PHILIPPINES

Was it a blunder to declare a 'state of rebellion'?

MAX V. SOLIVEN in Manila

In the wake of May 1 violent and vicious assaults by the mob on Malacañang and "reports" of a coup plot, that "State of Rebellion" declaration by President Arroyo was an awful mistake. It wasn't necessary.

The government could have dealt with plotters and hysterical crowds resolutely and decisively as, indeed, it did without invoking the spectre of a "state of rebellion."

Do you know what such an announcement of a crisis has done to our image of stability both at home and abroad? It gives the impression that the government is running scared, which is an altogether false impression. Now, what foreign investor or businessman (the heck with the already faltering tourist industry) will come here? When the President of the Republic, no less, sends the dire message that her administration is embattled and this nation is under a virtual "state of siege", then it's curtains for our reputation on the international scene.

The fact is that our nation has been fighting rebellions, right, left and center, ever since Independence in 1946. The late Dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos even used the so-called "rebel threat" as his excuse for imposing martial law in September 1972. Ninoy Aquino, this columnist and thousands of others, for that matter, were arrested on the charge that we "wittingly or unwittingly" contributed to this "subversion" and helped "destabilize" the government. Yet, even with an OV-10 bomber or RAM helicopter gunships attacking Malacañang and Camp Aguinaldo, no other "state of rebellion" or "state of emergency" was ever declared. Now,

after a hail of only a few thousand rocks and stones, attacks with icepicks, dos-por-dos clubs, and lead pipes, we're a nation embroiled in a "state of rebellion?" And what about the bruted-about military conspiracy? Potential putschists didn't even get, as yet, to fire off a single shot. Alas, this weird pronouncement which is neither fish nor fowl, and not even mentioned in the Constitution as such, has given us an international black-eye much worse than the savage pro-Erap rioters did even though they overturned and burned many vehicles, deluged the defenders of the Palace with hails of stones, killed a policeman, seriously wounded another policeman, and raised mayhem in general. Why? Because the declaration by the President of "a state of rebellion" was official. It gives the impression worldwide that our government is under grave threat.

Domestically, too, it provokes fear, even paranoia, that the GMA Administration may be gearing up to declare "martial law", pick up and imprison Opposition leaders, dissenters, and alleged "troublemakers." It's overkill of the clumsiest sort.

Was there a coup plot? Not even just perhaps, but probably so. But there have been Putschist plots and conspiracies before. The President could merely have shrugged confidently and quipped: "I eat coup plots for breakfast." (Pass the sugar, please). That would have told the nation and the world that all's well in the Philippines. God's in His Heaven, and La Gloria remains in excelsis in untrammelled tranquillity.

Susamiosep! Even in the Kingdom of Hyperbole, why make a mountain out of a molehill?



Pro-Estrada demonstration...



...And the police containing them..

The Banzai charge on Malacañang in the dark hour before dawn on May 1, at about 2:30 to 3 a.m., was well-orchestrated. It wasn't an impulsive act on the part of the EDSA TRES mob, with the crowd marching from the EDSA Shrine, suddenly inflamed by the hortatory speeches of Opposition and pro-Estrada firebrands. The "attackers", in sneaky fashion, surged practically out of nowhere, obviously well-prepared for violent confrontation.

The attacking hordes caught the police guarding the approaches to the Palace by surprise, and the first wave surged all the way to the gate of the Palace itself before the "defenders" rallied and pushed them back outside of Gate 7. The assaulting "forces" had come complete with "ammunition" in the form of piles of rocks and large stones, which they hurled with glee at the shocked troopers and Presidential Security Guards, hurting many of the guards before a counter-attack with tear gas, baton-wielding cops, PSG soldiers and Air Force personnel

drove them back. For hours the battle raged, with the mob the eyes of many glazed with hatred and their teeth grit in stubborn determination giving way reluctantly only in the face of repeated charges by the defenders and reinforcing soldiers, PAF military police, and sailors.

I don't think commentators and complaining Opposition spokesmen were right to call the rioters "unarmed" (walang arms or hindi naging dalang arms). A huge stone or rock is a terrible weapon which, hurled with precision and force, can crack a man's skull. One protester died when shot in the face, although it was clear that the policemen and soldiers exercised what is euphemistically called "maximum tolerance" (some radio-TV announcers even went overboard and called it "extreme maximum tolerance.") Another was reported to have died, but up to press time the fatality's identity has not been verified.

In truth, given the ferocity of the meleé, it's a wonder that not more were killed but it's early yet, and

more fatalities may still be reported. We saw TV footage of one policeman, staggered by a rain of rocks, fall to the ground, and draw his sidearm, but he hesitated to fire even when dozens of demonstrators ganged up on him and almost clubbed and kicked him to death.

It was fascinating to hear Opposition candidates and other anti-government stalwarts come on the air to deny that they had egged on the mob, or told them to march on Malacañang. Every one of them denied having used inflammatory words like "lusob lusob!" Must have been look-alikes, then, who were seen and heard screaming those words during the five nights of increasingly large rallies at the EDSA Shrine, in which the pro-Estrada crowd was whipped into a frenzy. In the end, to hear them plead innocence, it was a "mindless" and "leaderless" mob that had thrown itself against the gates of Malacañang in human wave convul-

sions, and raged through Mendiola, J.P. Laurel and the environs of the Palace. What? No leaders? How could it have been a case of spontaneous combustion?

The media, covering the event, came under snarling attack, too.

Reporters and cameramen were

roughed up, even those cute lady

TV newscasters on the spot were

given the scare of their lives as

stones and other objects rained on

their vehicles. Four ABS-CBN vans

were attacked, overturned, looted,

and burned. One GMA-7 van and

other news vehicles suffered the

same fate. A police car, an ambulance (with the Red Cross painted

prominently on it), and other cars

and vans were likewise destroyed,

with the patrol car burning ferociously when put to the torch for

more than an hour, mercifully without blowing up and hurting bystanders.

In sum, the angry mob's rage

knew no limits and spared no one in

its path. As soon as one of the

media

covering

the

event

clerk

and

the

mob

was

the

mob