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Rebel Clash Puts Aquino in New Crisis : Philippines: The battle leaves a dozen dead, including a general. The renegade governor who supported December coup attempt escapes arrest.

BY BOB DROGIN

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MANILA — A major new crisis loomed Sunday for

President Corazon Aquino's struggling administration after Philippine troops battled a renegade governor's heavily armed supporters in northern Luzon and a senior military official was shot to death.

Government troops backed by helicopter gunships later stormed a seedy hotel in Tuguegarao, a provincial capital about 250 miles northeast of Manila, and rescued an Aquino Cabinet secretary and about 50 other officials and guests trapped by rebel forces since dawn.

Suspended Gov. Rodolfo Aguinaldo, who has been charged with supporting last December's failed coup against Aquino, was still at large early today. But officials confirmed the death of Brig. Gen. Oscar Florendo, 51, chief armed forces spokesman and head of the military's civil relations branch.

More than a dozen other people were reported killed and 10 wounded in the fierce battle around the Delfino Hotel.

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“The act of cowardice and treachery of Aguinaldo’s followers will not go unpunished,” Aquino vowed in a statement here. “We will see that the fullest force of the law is meted out to them.

“I call on all our people to continue to reject violence and uphold our constitutional democracy and the processes of law in a peaceful manner,” she said.

The bloody daylong showdown raises dangerous new stakes for Aquino as she tries to restore confidence in her beleaguered administration and to crack down on rightist groups that have tried six times to topple her by military

rebellion.

The crisis also shows how little power her four-year-old government commands in regional fiefdoms increasingly controlled by local warlords and corrupt political bosses.

Gen. Renato de Villa, the military chief of staff, placed the 160,000-member armed forces on nationwide alert in case the mini-insurrection sparks further unrest. He ordered troops to seal off Tuguegarao to “neutralize or capture all Aguinaldo supporters and get Aguinaldo at all costs.”

Guards also were reinforced and gates closed at military bases in Manila. “We are trying to prevent the situation from spreading to Manila,” said Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Bizaon.

Aguinaldo and several hundred supporters fled after the 3 p.m. assault on the six-story hotel by marines armed with bazookas and backed by armored personnel carriers. Military officials said later that they captured 64 civilian supporters and 25 members of a local militia unit, along

with scores of assault rifles, mortars and a truck loaded with crates of ammunition. Another 110 local troops and enlisted men surrendered.

The clash erupted after Florendo and three other senior officers flew to the rugged Sierra Madre mountain town to arrest Aguinaldo, 41, for supporting last December's failed coup.

Instead, about 200 of Aguinaldo's followers invaded their hotel before dawn Sunday, holding Florendo hostage on the ground floor and trapping others upstairs. Other rebel troops cut phones and water, set up checkpoints and slashed tires of approaching vehicles. Hundreds of Aguinaldo civilian supporters chanted and cheered outside.

One of Florendo's aides, Lt. Butch Bustillos, told reporters in Tuguegarao that the general slipped away from his captors when the firing began and hid in a hotel restroom. He said Florendo was found 35 minutes later, wounded and unconscious. Officials said he bled to death from his wounds. It was not immediately clear if he was a

victim of assassination or was shot in the cross-fire.

Aguinaldo was suspended as governor for 60 days in January for announcing on radio at the start of the Dec. 1-9 military mutiny that he was sending 5,000 troops, plus tanks and artillery, to Manila to support the rebels. He resisted the suspension order for more than two weeks, holing up in a concrete bunker command complex and issuing taunts to the president.

Aguinaldo was indicted last Tuesday along with opposition leader Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile and five others on charges of rebellion and murder for their alleged role in the December uprising, which left more than 113 dead. Enrile was arrested in the Senate and has been detained in a suburban Manila police office.

Aguinaldo gained notoriety as a national police intelligence commander for deposed President Ferdinand E. Marcos. Amnesty International and other human rights groups repeatedly cited the thin, baby-faced officer for torturing, maiming and murdering his foes and raping their wives and daughters.

He gained popularity at home, however, for his fierce anti-Communist jungle exploits. Using government supplies, he trained and led his own “black army” of 4-foot-tall mountain tribesmen and former Communist commandos.

Aguinaldo also was implicated in an attempted coup in August, 1987. Then the provincial military commander, he flew the Philippine flag upside down to show support for the rebels, and later held out for months as chief of one of the so-called lost commands before resigning to run for governor of Cagayan province. The area is Enrile’s home province.

He won in a landslide in 1988, but critics say his administration has taken over lucrative gambling, illegal logging and smuggling in one of the nation’s poorest provinces. He denied the charges and accused his critics, including most of the provincial mayors and congressmen, of the same corruption.

Aguinaldo was slightly wounded early in the day Sunday when gunfire shattered the windows of his car. Meeting

reporters later, wearing blood-splattered battle fatigues and carrying an assault rifle, he insisted he was a “victim of injustice.”

“I don’t mind dying as a villain,” he added.



Bob Drogin



Bob Drogin is the former deputy bureau chief and White House editor in the Washington, D.C., bureau. He joined the Los Angeles Times in 1983 as a national correspondent in New York City, and later served as bureau chief in Manila and Johannesburg; he retired in November 2020. Drogin has won or shared numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize for meritorious service, two Robert F. Kennedy Awards and two Overseas Press Club awards.

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