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Palawan never an Abu lair, says MNLF exec

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Philippines -- Palawan has never been an Abu Sayyaf lair, contrary to military claims, and is unlikely to become one because the group has no support base in any part of the province.

This was the assessment of a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) official and local Muslim leader based in Puerto Princesa City, who brushed aside the Western Command's announcement last week that it had broken up an Abu Sayyaf cell in the province with the capture of six supposed members.

"That is an incredible claim," Al Babao, a member of the MNLF peace negotiating panel, told the Philippine Daily Inquirer (parent company of INQUIRER.net).

Babao is secretary of the MNLF delegation to the forthcoming Organization of Islamic Conference-convened tripartite meeting on the 1996 Peace Agreement in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

He dismissed reports that the six alleged Abu Sayyaf members captured by intelligence units of the Western Command were part of a terrorist cell that had planned to bomb Palawan during the September 11 anniversary of the 2001 terror attacks in the United States.

The Western Command last week announced that it had broken up an Abu Sayyaf cell in Palawan with the arrest of the six suspects on two separate occasions in the province last month.

Babao claimed that the MNLF has the capability to find out if there is an Abu Sayyaf presence in any part of the province.

"The truth is those who they have arrested were mere religious students. And then they planted a bomb to make it appear that these people were out to sow terror," Babao said.

He explained that the Abu Sayyaf has no capability to operate in Palawan because it has no community support base that it can rely upon.

"The [Abu Sayyaf] comes from only a few places in Basilan, Sulu and Zamboanga. The communities here in Palawan have no association with these communities where the [Abu Sayyaf] is known to exist," Babao said.

"Where will they hide and who will take care of them?" he asked.

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