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'ARE WE WINNING THE WAR?'

PDEA chief flags 'rampant recycling' of drugs

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MANILA, Philippines — The “recycling” of seized illegal drugs by law enforcers remains “rampant,” according to Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) chief Aaron Aquino.

Facing the Senate finance committee on Monday, Aquino also said the PDEA was watching a “drug queen” who bought narcotics from law enforcers.

The information came from his assets and sources, Aquino told the committee during a hearing on the PDEA budget where the agency also sought additional funds to boost its manpower and obtain more equipment for its operations.

The recycling of confiscated drugs calls into question the success of the Duterte administration’s war on drugs, according to Senators Franklin Drilon and Panfilo Lacson.

'Not winning drug war'

“This is why the war against drugs is not succeeding. In spite of so many accomplishments, battles may be won, but are we winning the war? Apparently we are not winning the war because even the President, in his latest [State of the Nation address to Congress], said the problem of illegal drugs still persists. That’s a tacit admission we are not winning the war,” Lacson told reporters.

Drilon also said the practice, which he described as worrisome and which was already a problem when he was justice secretary more than two decades ago, could undermine the drug war.

“As asserted by no less than the PDEA chief, there is rampant recycling, I am not very optimistic about the success of the antidrug campaign, in general. We hope that specific measures can be undertaken to prevent this horrible practice from continuing,” Drilon said.

He also said Aquino’s admission of drug recycling by law enforcers was credible because it was against the interest of the law enforcement agency. It’s not every day that a law enforcement official would lay the blame on another law enforcement agency, he added.

“When the PDEA chief says there is rampant recycling among law enforcers, you give that the highest credibility because this is an admission that law enforcement is failing from the very law enforcer itself,” Drilon said.

At the hearing, Aquino, responding to a question from Drilon, said there were still law enforcers who took a portion of confiscated drugs to sell or use for planting evidence.

He initially said this was no longer a practice in the PDEA, only in other law enforcement bodies, but later acknowledged it still happened in his agency.

“There are still reports, sir, especially some law enforcement agencies, whenever we seize drugs, for example we seize 5 kilos, a portion of this would become savings,” he said.

“I guess it’s still rampant, the recycling of drugs, especially the operatives down there,” he added.

The agents’ modus operandi is to keep half of the seized drugs for themselves, either for selling or for “future operations” or planting drugs on other people, and only surrender half to authorities, he said.

This usually happens right after a drug operation is concluded, he said.

He said he doubted that the seized drugs are pilfered from warehouses because these are well guarded, including by security cameras.

According to Aquino, he got his information from his assets from other law enforcement agencies, as well as from other reports reaching him.

‘Bato’ warning

But he said he did not have the names of the police officers involved, drawing a warning from Sen. Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa, a former Philippine National Police chief, that his information could be based on rumors and could demoralize policemen.

The PNP is doing its best to rid the force of rogue officers, Dela Rosa said.

“It’s difficult if we only have candor but our statements don’t have a leg to stand on,” he added.

Aquino also said a “drug queen” in Manila was known to be buying the drugs from law enforcers.

He said his information was that if a law enforcer goes to this drug queen to sell 10 or 20 kilos of drugs, “no questions asked,” the drugs will be bought immediately.

The PDEA had tried to apprehend the woman last year, but its operation, which targeted five to six buildings, had leaked, so the sting yielded nothing, he said.

According to Aquino, the current inventory of seized illegal drugs amounts to P22 billion, consisting mostly of P20 billion worth of “shabu” or crystal meth. The oldest haul in the inventory was seized in 2010, he said.

He also said officials could not dispose of the seized drugs quickly because judges were not always available to inspect these.

Under the law, the court must first inspect the confiscated drugs and other paraphernalia within 72 hours after the filing of the criminal case before these could be destroyed.

Drilon said he would coordinate with the Supreme Court’s court administrator to ensure that judges would do their part in the enforcement of the law.

Aquino said he aired a similar concern before the high tribunal earlier, but no action had been taken so far.

Drilon said the longer the drugs stay in the inventory, the greater the chance that these could be pilfered.

“The temptation is always there. You have to spend a lot of [funds] in order to make sure that this does not happen, but it can be prevented by destroying the drugs, within a certain period and with proper authorization,” he said.

Aquino said another way to prevent crooked law enforcers from stealing part of a drug haul was to conduct joint operations. In such operations, the probability of recycling drugs is lower because it would need greater collusion, he said.

Lacson pushed for the use of body cameras during drug operations, and for the imposition of administrative penalties when agents turn these off while on duty.