

Senator Chiz Escudero said he was puzzled why it took the Moro National Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) about six to seven hours to order its combatants to stop firing at the elite police force despite having knowledge that these were government troopers.

Escudero raised this observation at the Senate hearing conducted earlier today by the Committee on Public Order and Dangerous Drugs with the Committees on Peace, Unification and Reconciliation, and the Committee on Finance, to shed light on the circumstances surrounding the January 25 Mamasapano clash that killed 44 members of the Philippine National Police-Special Action Force (PNP-SAF) and injured about over dozen others.

During the Senate investigation, Rashid Ladiasan, head secretariat of the MILF's Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH), said that they received the information about the clashes between 6 a.m. and 6:30 a.m.. Reports, however, showed that MILF fighters stopped firing past noon that day.

At this point, Escudero asked: "Why did it take six to seven hours before the MILF instructed their men to stop firing? They only stopped when everyone was dead."

"We have an ongoing peace talks, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front already knew that the troops they were firing at were from the government. Why didn't they stop firing?" Escudero pointed out.

According to Ladiasan, lack of coordination and communication constrained the MILF from immediately carrying out a ceasefire.

The senator also asked Justice Secretary Leila De Lima if the peace agreement would affect the course of seeking justice for the slain SAF troopers and hold MILF fighters responsible for the deaths of "Fallen 44" accountable, in accordance with the law.

"Ma'am, just to clarify, correct me if I'm wrong, as a lawyer and secretary of justice, a peace

agreement does not and will not change our criminal laws? The peace agreement does not grant amnesty?” Escudero asked.

De Lima replied: “The fact that there is a peace agreement does not affect the power of the state to enforce its laws.”

Escudero also recalled the incident in 2011 when 19 soldiers were killed by the MILF during clashes in Al-Barka in Basilan – an incident that he insisted should be raised in the peace talks between the government and MILF negotiators to ensure accountability.