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sa oras ng krisis at kagipitan."*

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Solons hungry for probe...

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"Public officials and employees shall not solicit or accept, directly or indirectly, any gift, gratuity, favor, entertainment, loan, or anything of monetary value from any person in the course of their official duties or in connection with any operation being regulated by, or any transaction which may be affected by the functions of their office."

Presidential Decree 46 also makes it punishable "for any public official or employee, whether of the national or local governments, to receive, directly or indirectly, and for private persons to give, or offer to give, any gift, present, or other valuable thing on any occasion, including Christmas, when such gift, present, or other valuable thing is given by reason of his official position, regardless of whether or not the same is for past favor or favors or the giver hopes

or expects to receive a favor or better treatment in the future from the public official or employee concerned in the discharge of his official functions. Included within the prohibition is the throwing of parties or entertainments in honor of the official and employee or his immediate relatives."

Filipino diplomats also criticized the "insensitive act" in the face of the country's austerity measures, widespread poverty and involuntary hunger.

The latest Social Weather Station's survey shows that 20.3 percent of Filipino families experience involuntary hunger, while the National Statistical Coordination Board reported that the Philippines is unlikely to attain the 17 percent target for poverty incidence in 2010 because the level is at 30 percent. ■

Another congressman says he paid for \$15,000...

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Abante urged Pres. Arroyo to account in detail for all the expenses incurred in her recent US trip and not hide behind her spokesmen and election lawyer.

"After all, she is accountable for this," he said.

The *Washington Post* said Pres. Arroyo's \$15,000 dinner in Washington came hours after her meeting with President Barack Obama and three days before her \$20,000 New York banquet.

"Arroyo's visit to the White House on July 30 didn't draw much attention, and her dinner in Washington that night got nary a mention. And that's how it might have stayed—if not for a controversial meal in New York City," said the newspaper's "The Reliable Source" column entitled "Heartburn over two big meals."

No shame
The Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan) scored anew the "lavish spending" of President Arroyo's entourage, as well as the "constant evasion and obfuscation" of Palace spokespersons on the issue.

"Have they no shame? This is the second time reports have called attention to what has been perceived as lavish spending on the part of Pres. Arroyo's entourage during their US trip," the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan said in reaction to the *Washington Post* story.

"Malacañang cannot just dismiss these allegations as agitation-propaganda. The people demand an explanation, some transparency and accountability.

We cannot blame people for being outraged over these reports," Bayan secretary-general Renato Reyes said.

"We'd hope for some humility and honesty on the part of the president and her spokespersons. We detest the arrogance and utter lack of remorse being shown by this administration. What is happening is simply disgusting. They dined like kings, not once, but twice!" Reyes said.

Ombudsman fact-finding
The Office of the Ombudsman will conduct a fact-finding investigation into the controversial dinners based on a complaint filed by Akbayan party-list Representatives Walden Bello and Rissa Hontiveros-Baraquel.

"We will do a fact-finding investigation," Assistant Ombudsman Mark Jalandoni told *The Star*.

Jalandoni declined to give details.

Bello said that while the President enjoys immunity from criminal suit while in office, he said officials in her entourage should be penalized.

"That our officials wined and dined in one of the most expensive restaurants in the United States shows how disconnected, if not apathetic, they are to the plight of the very people they are supposed to serve," he said in a statement.

More careful

President Arroyo would likely be more careful in accepting dining invitations even as her lawyer hit the media for continuing to question the propriety of her having expensive dinners in the US.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, who was among the officials who joined the First Couple in dining at the Le Cirque restaurant, said the dinner was not that expensive as critics would like to point out.

"Move around in Metro Manila in first class restaurants and check who are those giving expensive blow-outs, how much money they're spending or giving birthday parties so lavish that they spent as much as one half million pesos or one million pesos and criticize. They are all in government," Ermita told reporters.

When asked what lessons the Palace could have learned in the controversy, he said: "Maybe we must have second thoughts... and we must be more circumspect but I don't think there was anything wrong with anybody having invited us to such a dinner."

Pres. Arroyo's lawyer, Romulo Macalintal, said moves to charge her for the purportedly extravagant dinner were a waste of taxpayers' money and government resources and time.

He said those pursuing such charges were being dishonest since they know that Presidents have immunity.

In defending his client, Macalintal also hit the media for continuing to question the morality of Pres. Arroyo's presence at the dinner.

"You, the media, could you say that you are moral? Do you believe that you are without fault and accuse the President?" he said in Filipino. ■

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