

GMA 'invited' to MEETING with Obama on July 30

by PIA LEE-BRAGO
Philstar.com

A meeting between President Arroyo and US President Barack Obama will finally take place when she visits Washington on July 30, the Department of Foreign Affairs announced last July 13. Washington also made the announcement in saying Mrs. Arroyo will become Southeast Asia's first leader to meet Obama.

"The (US) President will receive President Arroyo at the White House on July 30, where they will have an opportunity to discuss ways to enhance US-Philippine cooperation on critical global issues including counter-terrorism and climate change, as well as further the traditionally strong alliance and bond between our nations," the White House said in a statement.

US Embassy spokesperson Rebecca Thompson, however, did not say whether Mrs. Arroyo's visit to Washington was upon the request of the Philippine government or from an invitation from Washington.

Diplomatic sources, on the other hand, revealed Mrs. Arroyo's visit and one-on-one meeting with Obama is an invitation from the US government.

"The President was also the first leader from Southeast Asia to receive a telephone call from President Obama after his election," a DFA official also pointed out.

Malacañang said Mrs. Arroyo "has accepted the invitation to meet" with Obama.

"President Arroyo will discuss our poverty alleviation and economic resiliency programs, good governance, counter terrorism efforts and its contribution to peace and stability in the region," Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said.

"This visit is an affirmation of the strong partnership between the two countries," he said.

Mrs. Arroyo, who last visited Washington in June 2008 and met then-president George W. Bush in the White House, is also scheduled to meet "key US government officials and members of Congress," as well as entrepreneurs and business groups.

Remonde said it was not surprising that Washington extended the invitation to Mrs. Arroyo to meet Obama.

He said US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney already dropped hints several days ago that a meeting between Mrs. Arroyo and Obama is in the works.

Mrs. Arroyo was criticized last year for what opposition leaders described as a desperate attempt to seek an audience with Obama.

Last February, Mrs. Arroyo made an unscheduled side trip to Washington capital to attend the annual National Prayer Breakfast with Obama but they were not able to talk.

Kenney earlier told a radio interview that Obama is not avoiding Mrs. Arroyo.

She said she would not be surprised if there will be a high-level visit to Washington this year.

Lawmakers, on the other hand, urged Mrs. Arroyo to be wary of being used by the US in pursuing its interest in the region when she makes the visit.

Sen. Francis Pangilinan said the government must bear in mind that US interest in the Philippines is linked primarily to their concern about the growing economic and political strength of China.

"We must be careful not to be used as an unwitting pawn in the struggle between two giants,"

Pangilinan said.

Pangilinan said Mrs. Arroyo should ensure that the country's interest would be primordial in the meeting with Obama.

Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, for his part, expressed optimism that the meeting would be for the good of the country but not necessarily for Mrs. Arroyo.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II said the US concerns over the Philippines is confined to security issues and combating terrorism, noting the recent visit of US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief Leon Panetta in the country.

Roxas said the Philippines should not allow itself to be used as a "staging point" by the US government in any of its defense positioning in Southeast Asian region.

Sen. Loren Legarda said it is about time that Mrs. Arroyo and Obama should meet to discuss pressing issues.

"It has been long in coming. They should walk their talk and rethink developments. US should help in every way possible to countries vulnerable to climate change impacts," she said.

Sen. Alan Peter Cayetano, on the other hand, advised Mrs. Arroyo to push for the Philippine government's interests rather than seeking support from the US to allow her to stay in power.

Cayetano said Mrs. Arroyo should push for supporting the rights of Filipino veterans and find ways to help Filipinos working in the US who are greatly affected by the financial crisis.

"It's always good news when a Filipino President is given time and opportunity to push for a Philippine agenda. We hope the President would do just this to push for veteran's rights and compensation," he said.

DFA officials said Mrs. Arroyo is expected to thank Obama and the US Congress for passing the Veterans bill.

"(The meeting) is an opportunity for President Arroyo to thank the US Congress for the passage of the Veterans bill and discuss with them possible legislative agenda that will promote Philippine interest," a DFA official said.

The Stimulus Bill also known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, recognizes the military service of Filipino World War II veterans and grants a lump sum of \$15,000 for US-based veterans and \$9,000 for those living in the Philippines.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo admitted that the bill on the benefits of Filipino World War II veterans was in danger of being dropped because of the financial crisis and new priorities of the US government.

Manila has remained a steadfast US ally in Southeast Asia, notably in Washington's efforts to root out extremists and terror cells.

In early June, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates vowed stepped-up support for the Philippines in its battle against homegrown Islamic militant groups linked to al-Qaeda.

The Philippines and United States are bound by a 1951 treaty that calls on each side to help the other in times of war.

US special forces advisers have trained and equipped their Philippine counterparts against Abu Sayyaf, a small gang of militants with links to al-Qaeda and blamed for the country's worst terrorist attacks.

100 congressmen jostling for US trip

by GIL C. CABACUNGAN JR.
Inquirer.net

NO less than 100 congressmen—or nearly 40 percent of the total membership of the House of Representatives—are jostling for slots in President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's entourage in her July 30 meeting with US President Barack Obama in Washington.

Some of them had earlier signed up for Ms Arroyo's trip to Egypt but later canceled their bookings—apparently preferring the White House over the pyramids. The President left for Egypt last July 14.

A source at the House office, which processes the lawmakers' travel papers, said it had been swamped with requests since Malacañang last July 12 announced the Arroyo-Obama meeting.

The requests were still subject to approval, the source explained, doubting whether all of them would be granted.

In February, the last time the President went to the United States and failed—for the third time—to have an audience with Obama, about 20 congressmen accompanied her to Washington.

Double the Vegas junket

The estimated 100 congressmen seeking to travel with the President are double the number of lawmakers who flew to Las Vegas in May—while Congress was in session—to watch the championship fight between Filipino boxing star Manny Pacquiao and Britain's Ricky Hatton.

The President is again leaving for the US capital shortly after delivering her last State of the Nation Address (SONA) before Congress on July 27.

Quezon Rep. Danilo Suarez last July 14 said he was still weighing whether to join the trip considering that Congress has just resumed session by then after a two-month break.

"I still have a lot of paperwork to finish. I might not join the trip," Suarez said.

Anakpawis Rep. Joel Maglunsod warned fellow House members joining the US trip against spending public funds for the tour.

"They've had too many foreign trips and already spent millions in taxpayer money. It's a shame that they are jetsetting at the expense of their poor con-

stituents," Maglunsod said in a statement.

51 presidential trips

Lawmakers on official business trips abroad receive funding for their travel and hotel accommodations, plus allowances, from the House's P5-billion budget.

Ms Arroyo has taken 51 foreign trips since assuming office in 2001, all costing an estimated P3 billion.

Meanwhile, a senator surmised that Obama's decision to meet with Ms Arroyo means that her allies' perceived efforts to keep her in power through Charter change (Cha-cha) are over and that the country will have elections next year.

"This is because I don't see the (leader of the) US government, which fosters freedom and democracy across the world, agreeing to meet with a President if they have not cleared up the issue that there will be no more Cha-cha or any attempt to subvert our Constitution," Sen. Mar Roxas told reporters last July 14.

So, this is a good sign," said Roxas, considered among the front-runners in the 2010 presidential race. "(It's) a sign that the elections will proceed and Cha-cha is no more."

Wary of drug lobby

Roxas also urged President Arroyo not to give in should Obama lobby on behalf of giant pharmaceutical firms that would be affected by the country's cheaper medicines law.

"The pharmaceutical industry is one of the most powerful and wealthy lobbies in the US," Roxas said. "If this is brought up during the meeting, we should not sacrifice at the altar of good (RP-US) relations, the altar of photo-ops, the healthcare of our countrymen."

Roxas warned that the drug firms' lobby might be raised at the White House meeting as a "audit pro quo."

"A meeting between Presidents usually tackles a lot of issues like security, financial integration, trade, movement of persons across regions, agricultural help ... but this (issue of cheaper medicines) could also be brought up," he noted.

RP ranked 8th among countries with most casualties from disasters

THE Philippines ranked 8th among countries in the world with the most number of casualties due to tropical cyclones and other major disasters last year, according to the 2008 General Assessment Report (GAR) that the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) will launch in Manila next month.

The launching of the 2008 GAR was originally scheduled on Aug. 3 with Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro leading the ceremonies at the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) head office in Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City.

However, the launch was tentatively moved to Aug. 7 or 8 when the defense chief, who is concurrent NDCC chairman, returns to Manila from Washington. Teodoro would accompany President Arroyo on a state visit this July 30.

US President Barack Obama has invited the President to a meeting at the White House to discuss counter-terrorism and climate change concerns, among other issues, between the two countries.

Teodoro is among the Cabinet members in the of-

ficial delegation of Mrs. Arroyo in her meeting with Obama.

UNISDR senior regional coordinator Jerry Velasquez disclosed that the UNISDR, which assisted the drafting of the 2008 GAR, was formally launched in Bahrain last May.

This was subsequently launched in Indonesia, Thailand, Iran, Samoa and Japan, which are among the top ten countries that recorded the highest number of casualties due to natural calamities.

China and Myanmar were the top two countries in the GAR last year due to the Sichuan earthquake and cyclone Nargis, respectively.

The GAR stated that disaster risk is not evenly distributed and that developing countries like the Philippines have a "highly disproportionate share of risk."

The GAR cited that Japan has approximately 2.5 million citizens exposed annually to tropical cyclones while the Philippines has 16 million.

However, the estimated annual death toll from cyclones in the Philippines is almost 17 times greater than that of Japan. (Philstar.com)

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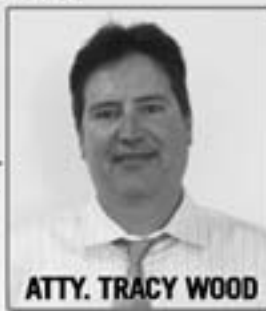
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