

# GMA to Congress: Speed up passage of 2008 budget bill

President Arroyo urged yesterday senators and congressmen to hasten their work in reconciling the two versions of the proposed P1.227-trillion General Appropriations Act for the year as the delay in the passage of a new budget has been hampering implementation of priority projects.

"So that urgent projects and programs would not be delayed, I urge (both chambers of) Congress to reach an agreement between the Senate and the House of Representatives and pass the budget as soon as possible," Mrs. Arroyo said in Filipino at the start of the National Security Council (NSC)-National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC)-Cabinet Group meeting at the Aguinaldo State Dining Room in Malacañang.

House leaders meanwhile assured President Arroyo yesterday that Congress would approve her proposed P1.227-trillion 2008 budget when it resumes session on Jan. 28.

They made the assurance in the wake of Mrs. Arroyo's renewed call for lawmakers to pass her budget proposal.

"Definitely, we will approve it when session resumes. The nation cannot afford a re-enacted budget," Majority Leader Arthur Defensor said.

"These are the funds needed by government to help the people, especially the poor, cope with rising prices of basic commodities brought about by the increasing prices of oil in the world market," she said, adding that the national outlay is necessary to complete ongo-

ing irrigation and farm-to-market road projects before the next crop season begins.

"With the needed vital infrastructures in place, the farmers' income would increase and there would be abundant and steady supply of food," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She said the infrastructure would be one of the ways to counter the rise in the prices of basic commodities.

Congress failed to approve the proposed national expenditure program before it went on its Christmas recess last December as the Senate questioned the alleged insertion of a P13.5-billion allocation for House members.

Budget Secretary Rolando Andaya Jr. said the alleged insertion is not part of the origi-

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nal budget proposed by the executive branch and urged the House to scrap the provision to break the impasse.

The approval of the P1.227-trillion budget was also delayed for three months last year due to a quarrel between the House and the Senate on the allocation of funds for the food-for-school program.

The proposed 2008 national allocation is P91 billion higher than the 2007 budget. Of the P1.227-trillion allocation, P11.5 billion will fund infrastructure projects mentioned by the President in her State of the Nation Address, Andaya said.

Under the proposed 2008 budget, the focus is on priority sectors like infrastructure facilities, education, health,

science and technology, including housing and salary adjustments for state workers, a Palace statement said.

The top gainers in terms of budgetary allocations this year are the Departments of Education (DepEd), P3.320 billion; Science and Technology (DOST), P1.876 billion; Health (DOH), P2.715 billion; Transportation and Communications (DOTC), P2.594 billion; Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), P776 million; Public Works and Highways (DPWH), P13.830 billion; National Housing Authority (NHA), P4.43 billion; salary adjustments, an additional of P30 billion which will be fully implemented next year, and P11 billion for the implementation of the Salary Standardization Law, the statement said.

The allocation for the Commission on Elections (Comelec) was pegged at P2.63 billion for the full poll automation in time for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) polls and the 2010 national and local elections.

The Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) remains the same under the proposed 2008 budget, while the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) was increased by 14 percent from 2007's P183.9 billion to P210.3 billion.

Mrs. Arroyo said she convened the meeting so the NSC and NAPC-Cabinet Group could reassess government's programs on livelihood, family planning and the plight of overseas Filipino workers as the economy sustains its growth.