

Away from media glare, GMA inaugurates airfield in Pangasinan

BINALONAN, Pangasinan – President Arroyo formally inaugurated yesterday a local airfield here as she also led the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a two-story, four-classroom school building.

Mrs. Arroyo led the inauguration of the airfield with government officials led by Gov. Amado Espino Jr. and Binalonan Mayor Ramon Guico Jr., also the president of the League of Municipalities of the Philippines (LMP).

Mrs. Arroyo likewise led the groundbreaking ceremony of a school building worth P4 million at the South Central School here.

The twin activities coincided with the town's annual fiesta celebration.

Binalonan is the hometown of the President's late mother, Dr. Evangelina Macaraeg Macapagal.

In her speech at the airport's hangar, Mrs. Arroyo said the airport is a very important factor for development, especially in the agricultural sector.

As she thanked her provincemates for their continuing support, the President cited five important features of a master plan for the province – airports, expressway, railroad, irrigation system, and seaport.

The President said she has talked with officials from the Department of Transportation and Communications (DOTC) regarding the medium-term development plan for North-rin Luzon.

She said the North Luzon quadrangle needs airports for agricultural cargo.

The President added that the Air Transportation Office (ATO) is prepared to give a license to this airport to be used commercially for agricultural cargo as Pangasinan is the biggest province in the North Luzon agri-business quadrangle.

Mrs. Arroyo shared that former President Fidel Ramos wrote last month two columns about this province wherein he said that Pangasinan is the most strategic route in investment and business destination.

"But he (FVR) said that Pangasinan is still a laggard compared to even small provinces in terms of seaports, airports and agricultural efficiency," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She added that Ramos advised that agricultural efficiency must be improved and one important factor is the agricultural airport.

Also considered one of the most important steps in agricultural efficiency is the utilization of the San Roque Dam's irrigation component to bene-

fit farmers in the downstream, she said.

President Arroyo said Ramos recommended that the expressway should be extended up to Rosales town, and the railroad project should be extended up to Dagupan, as the province also has no seaport.

"It is important for DOTC officials to be here to see the best place for a seaport," she said.

President Arroyo's trip to Pangasinan came after she cancelled a scheduled visit to Baguio City because of reported assassination threats against her.

Presidential Security Group head Brig. Gen. Romeo Prestoza, who revealed the assassination plot in the first place, justified the decision to allow Mrs. Arroyo to go to Binalonan, Pangasinan for two construction groundbreaking activities.

According to Prestoza, his men were able to conduct an ocular inspection of the venues in Pangasinan and determined that they would be able to secure the President.

It was only last Thursday that Prestoza revealed an assassination plot against the President by members of the terrorist groups Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf.

Prestoza said that the plot was contained in intelligence

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reports indicating that the President was one of several targets, which include embassies and museums.

The report caused Prestoza to recommend the cancellation of the President's attendance at yesterday's annual alumni homecoming of the Philippine Military Academy in Baguio City.

Prestoza himself said that the threat was not confined to Baguio City but to any area because of the mobility and capability of the terrorist groups.

Members of the opposition and leftist organizations meanwhile characterized the reported plot as bogus and was only released to the media in order to divert attention away from the NBN-ZTE deal controversy.

It was not the first time that the PSG recommended the cancellation of the President's events, as Prestoza recalled that during the third quarter of 2007, the President had to cancel a major event at Bontoc, Mt. Province because of a se-

curity threat.

This was followed by another cancellation of the Dec. 30 flag raising event of the President in Baguio City.

"(The decision) is based on our capability to secure the President based on the location plus the extensive coordination with the intelligence units and other organizations giving security to the President," Prestoza said.

In response to the criticism from the opposition, Prestoza emphasized that timing has nothing to do with their decisions, as these threats are present at any time.

He also defended his disclosure to the media about the assassination threat last Thursday.

"More often than not if you do not tell them the reason, they speculate and this will cause more problems," he said.

"By telling there is a real threat to the President, the people will be more aware in a way, then provide us with the necessary information so that we are able to better do our job of securing the Presi-

dent," he added.

Prestoza likewise denied a report that a member of the PSG named Bong Fontanilla was involved in the alleged abduction of former Philippine Forest Corp. president Rodolfo Noel Lozada Jr. at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport two weeks ago.

In an interview over *dzRH*, Prestoza said that there is no one in the PSG named Bong Fontanilla.

He also reiterated that if ever a member of the PSG was present at the NAIA at the time of Lozada's arrival, it should not be taken as anything unusual.

Prestoza pointed out that the PSG has full access privileges at the airport and that they can get inside at any time just by informing the management of the NAIA.

He added that an access pass issued by the airport authorities is unnecessary for his men since they have their own as part of their regular activities at the airport.

– With Marvin Sy