

# Arroyo to name new Comelec commissioners soon

By MARVIN SY

Malacañang said yesterday President Arroyo will soon fill the vacancies in the Commission on Elections after Comelec Chairman Jose Melo appealed to the President to issue an appointment soon as there are only three commissioners left in the commission.

Presidential Management Staff head Cerge Remonde, in an interview over *4zRB*, said Mrs. Arroyo is well aware of the problems faced by the undermanned Comelec, especially with the death of Commissioner Romeo Brawner last week.

"The President is aware of that and I'm sure that she will come up with her choice at the most appropriate time, which is soon," Remonde said.

Also yesterday, Comelec officials reported that the commission has finally found a replacement for the two slain heads of its legal department.

Remonde argued that the President is just making sure she makes the right appointments, especially because the Comelec's reputation has been tainted with allegations of massive poll fraud under the present administration.

"I would like to assure Chairman Melo and the public that President Arroyo right now is studying the nominees very seriously and I think the President will make her choice very

soon," Remonde said.

Just like Melo, Remonde said the next commissioner would have to go through a stringent nomination and selection process conducted by a multisectoral nominating committee.

"That is why the President is exercising much prudence in making her decision. And of course the President is praying that she would be able to come up with the best in order to restore the integrity of our electoral process," Remonde said.

Before Brawner died, the Comelec already lacked two commissioners because of the retirement of Commissioners Resurreccion Borra and Florentino Tuason.

Melo said the current set of one chairman and three commissioners is the bare minimum for the Comelec, since "anything less than four and the decisions of the Comelec would not be valid and binding."

Brawner was in charge of the Aug. 11 elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Meanwhile, Comelec spokesman James Jimenez disclosed yesterday that the poll body had chosen Atty. Ferdinand Rafanan, director of Comelec-National Capital Region (NCR), to be its new legal chief.

Rafanan replaces slain law department heads Alioden Dalaig and Wynne Asdala. His appointment takes effect today.

In a telephone interview, Rafanan said he actually applied for the position after Dalaig was gunned down in front of the Hyatt Hotel in Ermita, Manila in November last year.

Dalaig was replaced by Asdala who was also killed a few meters away from the Comelec office in Intramuros, Manila last February.

Asked if he was not scared by what happened to Dalaig and Asdala, Rafanan said he already accepted the risk that goes with the job.

"There's actually a risk in anything you do, wherever you go. But as long as you do what you think is right, I don't think you have to be afraid," said the 49-year-old Rafanan.

He added that he sought the position to help "erase the presumption of corruption" at the law department which handles election offense cases and screens the certificates of candidacy filed by those who want to run for public office.

With his new position, Rafanan said he intends to initiate the intensive training of Comelec lawyers on investigation and prosecution to improve their efficiency in handling cases.

"We have to constantly educate our people. I also hope to improve the system at the law department to fast-track the procedures there," he said.

Rafanan claimed that in late 2006, he was "frozen" by former Comelec chairman Benjamin Abalos for "insubordination" when, as NCR director, he contradicted Dalaig's opinion that it was legal for the poll body to verify the signatures gathered and submitted by Sigaw ng Bayan for Charter change.

In doing so, Rafanan cited a Supreme Court decision stating that the Comelec should not take cognizance in any decision to amend the Constitution.

He was relieved from the NCR office and detailed at Abalos' office until June last year when he was again appointed as NCR director. — With Sheila Crisostomo