

GMA says EVAT savings to bankroll AFP modernization

BENITO EBUEN AIR FORCE BASE, Mactan – The billions needed to bankroll the military's modernization program will come from the proceeds of the highly criticized Expanded Value Added Tax (EVAT), President Arroyo declared here yesterday.

Speaking before top defense and military officials during the 61st anniversary of the Philippine Air Force (PAF), Mrs. Arroyo said the EVAT would finance the purchase of modern equipment and fighter aircraft to enhance the capabilities of the PAF.

Considered the most powerful Air Force in the region during the 1960s, the PAF is now lagging behind its neighbors in terms of firepower and air assets.

Mrs. Arroyo said the PAF would be acquiring jets for training fighter pilots out of the EVAT savings.

"PAF will be acquiring trainer jets in order for the unit not to run out of planes and for the pilots to have planes to fly," she said.

PAF chief Lt. Gen. Pedrito Cadun-

gog said the purchase of modern jet fighters is now being discussed.

"After (the year) 2010, we are looking at Horizon 2," Cadungog said, referring to the military's program to build a credible external defense under the Philippine Defense Reform (PDR) program.

Cadungog, however, declined to elaborate on the fighter jets the Air Force is planning to buy. He said the information should come from the country's decision makers.

Cadungog though stressed the importance of upgrading the Air Force's capability.

"Personally I am not worried about foreign invaders but as a respected nation, we should have a respectable military to protect our national territory and our resources. Without that, who will respect us?" Cadungog said.

He said foreign aircraft have been coming in and out of the country's airspace without paying their flyover dues to the government.

By **JAIME LAUDE**

Cadungog said military planners are also considering acquiring powerful radar systems to detect foreign aircraft entering the country's airspace.

For the meantime, Cadungog said military planners are focusing on how to upgrade internal security operations.

Mrs. Arroyo added the US government would be supporting the ongoing Capability Upgrade Program (CUP) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as outlined in the government's PDR program to modernize the military.

She said Air Force personnel would be trained by their counterparts in the US military on the upgrade programs sponsored by the US government.

This is on top of the hard assets the US would be providing to the AFP, Mrs. Arroyo said.

President Arroyo defended her trip to the US while the country was being ravaged by typhoon "Frank"

two weeks ago.

She said her visit to the US resulted in more economic, food and military aid for the country.

"In my visit to the US, our most important ally, I met President (George W.) Bush and other top government officials to press for economic and food security aid and a stronger military cooperation," Mrs. Arroyo told the assembled men and women of the Air Force.

Mrs. Arroyo stressed that during her meetings with top US officials, she was able to present and press for the country's economic and food needs.

At the same time, Mrs. Arroyo also commended the Air Force for their role in the relief, rescue and disaster operations in typhoon-ravaged areas in the country.

She also announced a 10-per-

cent increase in the salaries of government employees, including the military, that will take effect this month.