

GMA allies vow to thwart attempt to cut budget

By JESS DIAZ

Allies of President Arroyo in the House of Representatives vowed yesterday to frustrate the efforts of opposition congressmen to cut the proposed P1.415-trillion 2009 budget by at least P100 billion.

"The minority can propose to trim the budget by P100 billion, but they have to defend each and every cut they want to make," Deputy Speaker Simeon Datumanong said.

"In the end, it is still the majority that will decide whether the proposal of the opposition is justified or not," he said.

Rep. Jeci Lapus of Tarlac said the problem with opposition congressmen is that "they keep on connecting everything, including the supposed 'fats' in the proposed budget, to the 2010 presidential elections."

"We should stop thinking about the elections and focus on helping the government weather the possible disastrous effects of the financial crisis in the United States on our economy," he said.

He said the economy has to be strengthened "especially now that there is a worldwide economic crisis."

For his part, Rep. Alvin Sandoval of Malabon-Navotas said the minority does not have the numbers to push for the plenary approval of its proposed P100-billion cut.

"A majority of the administration lawmakers, if not all, will support the Malacañang-proposed budget because this is essential to keep our economy going amid global financial concerns," he said.

The House is expected to approve the budget on second reading on Friday before Congress goes on a month-long break on Saturday.

Last Friday, minority leader Ronaldo Zamora revealed that he and his opposition colleagues would seek a reduction of at least P100 billion in the proposed P1.4-trillion 2009 budget.

"Our figures will show that there is roughly P100 billion to P200 billion that can be cut and we can still have a responsible budget that addresses the requirements of more infrastructure," Zamora told reporters.

"We want a figure that provides some growth, a growth that can be absorbed by the economy. Definitely, it will still be an increase (over this year's budget), but an increase that we can probably afford," he said.

The proposed 2009 budget is about P190 billion more than this year's expenditure level.

Asked to comment on Zamora's reduction proposal, Budget Secretary Rolando Andaya Jr. said Malacañang would oppose the huge cut in the budget.

"We think our proposal would allow us to prepare for whatever adverse effects the financial crisis in the United States would have on our economy," he said.

For his part, Quirino Rep. Junie Cua, House appropriations committee chairman, said the budget should not be cut "to en-

able the government to pump-prime the economy."

Zamora said he and his opposition colleagues would not touch funds for infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, and vital social services in trying to cut the budget.

"We're going to do it by agency, most especially by program and lump sum appropriations. It will mean less presidential pork," he said.

He said the items they would propose to be reduced include expenses for travel, intelligence gathering, donations, training and seminars, and other non-essentials.

He pointed out that the travel budget for the entire bureaucracy next year amounts to several billion pesos.

He said they would also take out from the 2009 outlay funds that could be used for purposes of the 2010 presidential-congressional local elections.

"This is the classic example of an election budget," he stressed.

Zamora explained that if the government is unable to support its budget proposal for next year, any or all of three things could happen.

"Obviously, they will resort to increasing their efficiency in tax

collection - and you know that's not happening - impose new taxes and go on another round of borrowing," he said.

He said the failure of the government to support the budget with revenues from existing sources could mean "a startling amount of budget deficit."

Administration officials are projecting a funding deficit of about P50 billion this year and P60 billion in 2009.

Andaya admitted that the funding gaps would be filled through borrowings.