

GMA urged to save money by cutting foreign trips

Sen. Francis Escudero called on the government yesterday to save money by cutting unnecessary expenses instead of proposing new taxes.

Escudero said President Arroyo should set an example by

cutting on unnecessary foreign trips.

"Are these foreign trips necessary at this time? Money spent in these travels can be spent for more important

By CHRISTINA MENDEZ

needs," Escudero said.

He said the country has not benefited from Mrs. Arroyo's foreign trips.

"How has the country benefited from all these travels?

Can we have a cost-benefit accounting of the many trips she has taken since 2001?" the senator asked.

Escudero noted that Mrs. Arroyo left for Japan and Bra-

zil just several days after she returned from trips to South Korea and Russia.

Escudero said he is opposed to imposing new taxes. He proposed that the government

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should plug tax collection loopholes and crack down on rampant smuggling to increase revenue collection.

Escudero said he would look into the amount of public funds spent for Mrs. Arroyo's foreign travels during the deliberations for next year's budget.

Malacañang, for its part, welcomed a congressional probe on the presidential expenses.

Deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said the

Senate has every right to look into the issue and assured the public that the Palace has nothing to hide.

"They have every right to do that. We have nothing to hide. All the records are in place, I think at the proper forum and at the right time, if it's needed then we can always give the documents," Fajardo said.

Fajardo suggested securing the necessary documents from the Commission on Audit (COA).

"Anyway these are public documents and you can even ask the COA to give the necessary documents," she added.

Deputy presidential spokesman Gary Olivar argued the cost of the President's trips abroad couldn't be quantified in simple monetary value.

He said the issue is what the President brings back for the country as a result of these foreign visits.

Olivar said Mrs. Arroyo usually brings home billions of dollars in investments from the governments and businesses of the countries she visits.

On top of this, the President also establishes goodwill and stronger bilateral relations with these countries, which could not be measured in dollars and cents.

Olivar cited the recent visit of Mrs. Arroyo to Egypt and Syria during which both nations committed to support the Philippines' bid for observer status at the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

"What price can we give to the importance of having lasting peace for our Muslim brethren in Mindanao?" Olivar asked.

- With Marvin Sy