

# Senate to probe GMA's trips

By AUREA CALICA

Sen. Panfilo Lacson yesterday said the Senate would scrutinize the budget for foreign trips of the Office of the President (OP) to make sure taxpayers' money was not being wasted.

Lacson, chairman of the Senate ways and means committee, also said it would be easy for

the opposition to show proof that a huge amount of funds was being used for President Arroyo's foreign trips.

He said documents could be obtained from the Commission on Audit and these would reveal the expenditures of the OP for the travels abroad.

Turn to Page 6

"I remember during the previous budget deliberation, local and foreign trips of the President amounted to P800 million (in a year). I don't know how much in 2009. But yes, we should really scrutinize the budget of the OP particularly those pertaining to foreign trips," Lacson told reporters in an ambush interview after a hearing at the Senate.

He emphasized that expenses for every travel must be evaluated vis-à-vis the benefits derived from it.

"They can say there was a \$2-billion investment but did the investment arrive? The taxpayers' money is probably just wasted because of President Arroyo's frequent travels," he said.

Lacson said the whole Arroyo family and clan would even join the trips sometimes, as well as the families of the mem-

bers of the House of Representatives. He said the budget deliberation would already start shortly after the opening of session in July and this could be the venue to assess the budget for foreign trips of the President.

"We should scrutinize this although this will already cover the next administration, if (Mrs. Arroyo) will not extend her term, because we will be tackling the budget for 2010," Lacson said.

Earlier, Sen. Francis Escudero asked the government to save taxpayers' money by cutting unnecessary government expenses, like foreign trips, instead of proposing new taxes to shore up dwindling revenue collections.

### 'What's in Dubai?'

Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay also said that the President has to explain her side trip to Colombia and frequent side trips to Dubai.

Binay said Mrs. Arroyo made an unscheduled detour to Colombia, the latest of her frequent side trips to countries not on her official itineraries.

"These side trips have become more frequent in the past months and since Mrs. Arroyo is traveling on taxpayers' expense, the public deserves to know the reason for these unscheduled visits," he said.

Binay cited reports that Mrs. Arroyo took a side trip to Cartagena, Colombia en route to Brazil with members of her family, and that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was not aware of the visit.

"Until a complete accounting is made, the public will continue to speculate as to the real motive behind private visits to such destinations as

Dubai and now Cartagena," he said. Binay said Arroyo also made several side trips to Dubai during her travels to the Middle East and that she made 50 foreign trips since 2001, the cost of which have not been fully disclosed.

"When millions of Filipinos are hungry and jobless, it would be hard to justify the jet-setting ways of a national leader who brings relatives, nannies, and personal stylists to foreign countries, not to mention scores of political allies and their families," he said.

"Malacañang is fond of citing millions of dollars in pledges and promises of job openings. How many of these pledges became reality and how many Filipinos were actually employed? On these, Malacañang remains silent," he added.

Binay said Dubai has been a frequent destination for Mrs. Arroyo despite the absence of jobs for foreign workers there, adding that the Chief Executive flew to Dubai after the aborted ASEAN Summit in Thailand last May.

The President also made a recent stopover in Dubai from Davos, Switzerland on the way to an unscheduled side trip to Washington where she tried, but failed, to secure a photo opportunity with US President Barack Obama.

### Gains outweigh cost

But Malacañang was quick to defend the overseas trips of the President, saying the investments and other benefits gained by the country far outweigh whatever cost is incurred for her trips.

Deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said the Palace is gathering the information about the President's trips now that questions have been raised about the use of taxpayers' money for these trips.

She said the documents pertaining to the cost of the trips are available to the public and that these go through the Commission on Audit.

Former President Fidel Ramos, who was also subjected to criticism during his term because of his frequent travels abroad, defended the trips of the President as an important part of her functions

as head of state.

Ramos said the criticism faced by Mrs. Arroyo was not because of the frequency of the trips but the way these are organized by her planners.

"The desired and more common method is to cluster your travels abroad so that when you exit from your country, you do a string of state or official visits, involving four or five countries," he said.

The President has been going on trips involving two to three countries at a time and in some occasions, some countries are repeated within the same year.

In several instances, the President also goes to different regions and continents on a single leg, which would cost a lot more than combining all visits to the same region into one trip.

Ramos cited the President's current itinerary, which involved a visit to Japan then to South America for a state visit to Brazil.

He said the President did the same thing last February when she made a side trip to Washington for the National Prayer Breakfast after her visit to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in the Middle East.

He pointed out that the trip to Washington was not even a White House affair since the prayer breakfast was organized by the US Congress.

"I think that is where the inefficiency lies in the foreign trips of the President," Ramos said.

The former president also criticized the size of the official and unofficial delegations of Mrs. Arroyo during her trips, particularly those coming from Congress.

"I don't know, to each his own style. But if your program is austerity then your delegation should also be based on austerity," Ramos said.

"Even if they say that it's at their personal expense, this is also on government time. They are not on official leave and they continue to get paid. Maybe this has become a habit because everybody is getting away with it," he added.

Deputy presidential spokesman Gary Olivar argued that the trips should be measured by their benefits to the country and not by their cost.

-With Jose Rodel Clapano, Marvin Sy