

GMA makes unscheduled stop in HK before returning to Manila

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo made an unscheduled stop yesterday in Hong Kong, on her way back from her official visits to Japan and Brazil to meet with the large Filipino community there and hold talks with anti-corruption czar Tony Kwok amid criticisms on the necessity and frequency of her foreign trips.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, who is part of the presidential delegation, told the government-owned *dzRB* the stop-over in Hong Kong was a "working visit of the President."

Mrs. Arroyo and members of her delegation are expected to return to Manila tomorrow, he said.

"This (working visit) is in response to the clamor of our fellow Filipino overseas workers to meet her for a dialogue," Remonde said.

He said Mrs. Arroyo is also schedule to meet with Kwok, who was tapped in 2005 as the government's consultant on anti-corruption.

"It will be a review of the progress of the anti-corruption programs that has been started under the consultancy of Mr. Tony Kwok and whatever the results of the discussions, we will report it," Remonde said, referring to the coming meeting.

Kwok was credited for dramatically reducing corruption when he headed Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption. Kwok earlier pointed out that negative perceptions have clouded the reality of the country's gains against corruption.

Remonde also continued to defend Mrs. Arroyo's foreign trips, saying the criticisms are coming from opposition leaders seeking publicity for their presidential or senatorial ambitions.

He said he was puzzled by the way opposition Sen. Francis Escudero and Makati City Mayor Jejomar Binay are questioning the trips.

"If he (Escudero) is questioning the trips, that is a sad indication (that) his thinking is insular."

"I mean what kind of a president would he be if he will not actively get involved in international affairs," he said.

"Our world has become a globalized economy. No one nation is safe on its own. For any responsible leader, any responsible government must engage actively in international affairs because global engagement is one of the keys for our economy to be strong," he said.

He said the beneficiaries of the trips

are the Filipino people.

He also dismissed allegations from Binay that the forging of diplomatic ties with Barbados was somehow connected with the recent awarding of the Commission on Elections' automation project to a company registered in the said country.

He said establishing diplomatic relations with a country takes a long time.

"It is a product of long process and a series of negotiations," Remonde said.