

# Palace says GMA trip to Egypt necessary, cost-efficient

Malacañang yesterday defended President Arroyo's forthcoming trip to Egypt for the 15th Non-Aligned Movement Summit as one that is necessary and cost efficient.

Still smarting from criticisms about the frequency of the President's overseas trips and their cost on taxpayers, Malacañang assured the public that the delegation to Egypt trip would be "very lean."

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said he expects only three Cabinet members to accompany the President in her two-day trip on top of the basic support staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the Press Secretary.

Aside from the Press Secretary, Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo and Secretary to the Cabinet Silvestre Bello III would also accompany the President.

Remonde said Bello was part of the delegation because he was the one who represented Mrs. Arroyo during the last NAM summit.

The opposition has questioned the actual cost of the President's trips and demanded full disclosure to the public.

The Senate has even threatened to initiate a probe into the cost of the trips, estimates of which went up to as high as P8 billion.

Malacañang argued that the figure quoted was too high and that the benefits of these trips far outweighed their cost.

Remonde said the President plays an important part in this year's summit as she was designated by the host country as the spokesperson for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"President Arroyo must attend the summit because she was personally chosen by the president of the NAM summit, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as the spokesperson for all the

ASEAN heads of government and heads of state."

He said that it is an honor for the President to speak on behalf of the ASEAN and "a recognition of the stature of our President in the international community."

"It must be emphasized that this is a summit meeting of more than 100 kings, heads of government and heads of state. Next to the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement is the biggest international organization," Remonde said.

He said there would be a lot of opportunities for bilateral meetings with other world leaders, including the members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Philippines has long been vying for observers status in the OIC, and with the backing of Egypt and Syria, the government is hoping to finally get into the influential organization.

The President is expected to leave for Egypt either this Tuesday or Wednesday and should be back in the country by Friday.

This year's NAM Summit would be held at Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt and focus on diplomatic, economic, development and social issues.

Around 110 countries will be represented in the summit, including 60 heads of state and government.

The first NAM Summit was held in Belgrade of the former Yugoslavia which was attended by 25 countries. It focused on the accelerating arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

With the increase in participation of developing countries, subsequent summits shifted to condemnation of Western colonialism and the retention of foreign military installations.

Eventually, the focus shifted from political issues to solutions to global economic and other problems. — Marvin Sy