

GMA 'invited' to meeting with Obama on July 30

By PIA LEE-BRAGO

A meeting between President Arroyo and US President Barack Obama will finally take place when she visits Washington on July 30, the Department of Foreign Affairs announced yesterday.

Washington also made the announcement in saying Mrs. Arroyo will become Southeast Asia's first leader to meet Obama.

"The (US) President will receive President Arroyo at the White House on July 30, where they will have an opportunity to discuss ways to enhance US-Philippine cooperation on critical global issues including counter-terrorism and climate change, as well as further the traditionally strong alliance and bond between our nations," the White House said in a statement.

US Embassy spokesperson Rebecca Thompson, however, did not say whether Mrs. Arroyo's visit to Washington was upon the request of the Philippine government or from an invitation from Washington.

Diplomatic sources, on the other hand, revealed Mrs. Arroyo's visit and one-on-one meeting with Obama is an invitation from the US government.

"The President was also the first leader from Southeast Asia to receive a telephone call from President Obama after his election," a DFA official also pointed out.

Malacañang said Mrs. Arroyo "has accepted the invitation to meet" with Obama.

"President Arroyo will discuss our poverty alleviation and economic resiliency programs, good governance, counter terrorism efforts and its contribution to peace and stability in the region," Press Secretary Serge Remonde said.

"This visit is an affirmation of the strong partnership between the two countries," he said.

Mrs. Arroyo, who last visited Washington in June 2008 and met then-president George W. Bush in the White House, is also scheduled to meet "key US government officials and members of Congress," as well as entrepreneurs and business groups.

Remonde said it was not surprising that Washington extended the invitation to Mrs. Arroyo to meet Obama.

He said US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney already dropped hints several days ago that a meeting between Mrs. Arroyo and Obama is in the works.

Mrs. Arroyo was criticized last year for what opposition leaders described as a desperate attempt to seek an audience with Obama.

Last February, Mrs. Arroyo made an unscheduled side trip to Washington capital to attend the annual National Prayer Breakfast with Obama but they were not able to talk.

Kenney earlier told a radio interview that Obama is not avoiding Mrs. Arroyo.

She said she would not be surprised if there will be a high-level visit to Washington this year.

Lawmakers, on the other hand, urged Mrs. Arroyo to be wary of being used by Obama in pursuing its interest in the region when she makes the visit.

Sen. Francis Pangilinan said the government must bear in mind that US interest in the Philippines is linked primarily to their concern about the growing economic and political strength of China.

"We must be careful not to be used as an unwitting pawn in the struggle between two giants," Pangilinan said.

Pangilinan said Mrs. Arroyo should ensure that the country's interest would be primordial in the meeting with Obama.

Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, for his part, expressed optimism that the meeting would be for the good of the country but not necessarily for Mrs. Arroyo.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II said the US concerns over the Philippines is confined to security issues and combating terrorism, noting the recent visit of US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief Leon Panetta in the country.

Roxas said the Philippines should not allow itself to be used as "a staging point" by the US government in any of its defense positioning in Southeast Asian region.

Sen. Loren Legarda said it is about time that Mrs. Arroyo and Obama should meet to discuss pressing issues.

"It has been long in coming. They should walk their talk and rethink developments. US should help in every way possible to countries vulnerable to climate change impacts," she said.

Sen. Alan Peter Cayetano, on the other hand, advised Mrs. Arroyo to push for the Philippine government's interests rather than being supported from the US to allow her to stay in power.

Cayetano said Mrs. Arroyo should push for supporting the rights of Filipino veterans and find ways to help Filipinos working in the US who are greatly affected by the financial crisis.

"It's always good news when a Filipino President is given time and opportunity to push for a Philippine agenda. We hope the President would do just this to push for veteran's rights and compensation," he said.

DFA officials said Mrs. Arroyo is expected to thank Obama and the US Congress for passing the Veterans bill.

"It (the meeting) is an opportunity for President Arroyo to thank the US Congress for the passage of the Veterans bill and discuss with them possible legislative agenda that will promote Philippine interest," a DFA official said.

The Stimulus Bill also known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, recognizes the military service of Filipino World War II veterans and grants a lump sum of \$15,000 for US-based veterans and \$9,000 for those living in the Philippines.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo admitted that the bill on the benefits of Filipino World War II veterans was in danger of being dropped because of the financial crisis and new priorities of the US government.

Manila has remained a steadfast US ally in Southeast Asia, notably in Washington's efforts to root out extremists and terror cells.

In early June, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates vowed stepped-up support for the Philippines in its battle against homegrown Islamic militant groups linked to al-Qaeda.

The Philippines and United States are bound by a 1951 treaty that calls on each side to help the other in times of war.

US special forces advisers have trained and equipped their Philippine counterparts against Abu Sayyaf, a small gang of militants with links to al-Qaeda and blamed for the country's worst terrorist attacks. - With Paolo Romero, Christina Mendez, AFP