

Think about the benefits, Palace tells critics of GMA-Obama meet

Malacañang said yesterday President Arroyo's coming meeting with US President Barack Obama at the White House should not be used to hit the administration, considering benefits the talks could bring to the country.

Deputy Presidential Spokesman for Economic Affairs Gary Olivar said Mrs. Arroyo's meeting with US Central Intelligence Agency director Leon Panetta at the Palace last Sunday should also not be given political color.

He said Mrs. Arroyo's meeting with Obama on July 30 is a "great honor for the country and a recognition of our country's importance."

"(The trip is) a very important milestone for our diplomacy abroad, not something that should be used as political grist," he told a news briefing.

"We do hope that we could lay off these issues on the visit because it is too important for people's well being as well as state of relationship with the United States," he said.

"We are saddened by yet another instance where politics is brought into a situation that is really too important."

Mrs. Arroyo was earlier criticized for her apparent desperation to have an audience with Obama since his election in November that was repeatedly denied by the Palace.

The White House announced over the weekend their meeting, saying she will be the first Southeast Asian leader to meet with Obama.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo accepted the invitation of Obama.

Olivar said the meeting with Panetta was purely on security matters that also brought some benefits for the country, particularly on the cooperation between the two countries on the war against terror.

He said the recent bombings in Mindanao should "be a sufficient reminder of how important that war continues to be" and "how important our country remains to be in the international effort to coordinate (the fight against terror)."

Terrorism and climate change will top the agenda of the meeting between the two leaders, officials said.

In the President's coming meeting with Obama, the White House said the two leaders would 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."

While in Washington, the President will also meet with key US government officials and members of Congress, private sector partners, business groups, and the Filipino community.

Bases issue

Meanwhile, Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay warned yesterday that the agenda of the meeting could be for the bargaining of the return of US bases in the country in exchange for the extension of Mrs. Arroyo's term.

Binay said Arroyo might conveniently dangle the US bases' return in exchange for support for her plan to extend her term beyond 2010 through Charter change (Chacha).

"The 1987 Constitution expressly prohibits foreign military bases in the country. But with Arroyo's allies intent on amending the Constitution, the ban can be amended to allow the US to again open military bases in the Philippines," he said.

He said the Arroyo administration might seek US support to amend the Char-

ter through a constituent assembly (con-ass) and shift to a parliamentary form of government.

- Paolo Romero, Jose Rodel Clapano