

28 congressmen with GMA in US trip

At least 28 members of the House of Representatives led by Speaker Prospero Nograles have joined President Arroyo on her US trip upon her invitation.

The President and her entourage left yesterday afternoon on Philippine Airlines flight 116 bound for Vancouver, Canada. From Vancouver, the presidential party will take a

charter flight to Washington, where she is to meet US President Barack Obama.

Included in Mrs. Arroyo's entourage are her congressman son Diosdado C. Carnarines Sur, Deputy Speaker Amelita Villarosa, and Representatives Danilo Suarez of Quezon, Martin Romualdez of Leyte, Aurelio Gonzalez Jr. and Anna York Bondoc of Pangasinan; Vincent Crisologo and Mary Ann Susano of Quezon City; Antonio Alvarez of Palawan, Monico Puentevella of Bacolod City, Edgar Chaito of Bohol, Del de Guzman of Marikina, Felix Añelero of Camarines Sur, and Bienvenido Abante Jr. of Manila.

Also in her delegation are Rep. Nerissa Soon-Ruiz and Ramon Darano IV of Cebu, Hermandino Mandanas of Batangas, Francisco Matugas of Surigao del Norte, Cecilia Suarez Lana of Abra, Zensaida Angping of Manila, Alvin Sandoval of Malabon-Novatas, Rachel Arenas of Pangasinan, and newly proclaimed party-list Representatives Rodante Mar-

By JESS DIAZ and JOSE KATIYGAK

noval base as part of Obama's mission to close the gap at the base by the end of the year to repair America's tarnished image abroad.

He dismissed the opposition's continuing speculation about Arroyo's political future as "mindless games because there is a constitutional injunction for her to step down in 2010."

"That is the law and she will subscribe to that," he said.

"As far as I am concerned she has said there will be elections and she will step down. She can't say it any clearer than that," Yap told THE STAR on Tuesday.

Yap said he will meet his US counterpart, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and seek US funding for a \$120-million facility in the Philippines to assist the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) in accelerating the field testing of "climate-ready seeds" adaptable to climate change.

"Climate change is wreaking havoc on our planting schedule. We need seeds that don't need too much water and seeds that have short gestation periods," he said.

There was also need for a remote sensing and geographic information system. He said he would not take up the specific issue of rice with Vilsack because "we have government-to-government transactions in place, we are getting from the open market and our rice production is growing."

But he said he will ask Vilsack if the US could expand the GSM 102 program and include more commodities "as it's a good lifeline for us."

The 102 program promotes sales of US farm goods to developing countries by assuring lenders they will get paid even if a borrower defaults.

The Philippines used \$75 million in GSM credit guarantees last year to buy US rice.

This year the Philippines' rice imports are expected to drop to 1.5 million metric tons from 2.3 million MT in 2006 because of higher production and more stocks, Yap said.

"Even if you add the private imports this year of 200,000 MT that will put total imports at only 1.7 million MT and yet we have added 1.8 million new months to feed," he said.

The government has a rice stockpile of more than a month and the country's national inventory is close to 90 days, he said.

Normally the government

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Terrorism high on agenda

Mrs. Arroyo said that combating regional terrorism will dominate her talks with Obama in the White House on Tuesday.

She said the meeting comes "at a pivotal time for US relations in Asia" and she will also use it to discuss the economic crisis and climate change.

Still, she said peace and security will top the agenda, "particularly in the light of the recent Jakarta bombings."

Suicide bombers blew themselves up in two hotels in the Indonesian capital on July 17, killing seven people and wounding 100.

Mrs. Arroyo said she will discuss US military training of Filipino soldiers in the south, where American troops have been providing intelligence and humanitarian support to efforts to eradicate the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf group.

Separately, the government has been trying to restore talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

"Just as important, the US has been a key ally in advancing soft power by helping build schools, roads and bridges and building up our economy through US development assistance," Mrs. Arroyo said.

The President pointed out that the US plays an essential role in the Philippines' economic, diplomatic and national security.

"We plan to ensure that these objectives remain front and center and on track between our two nations," she said.

Reminder for Obama

But her meeting with Obama will not be without controversy. A group of senior opposition leaders published yesterday an open letter to Obama, urging him to be "militant" in Mrs. Arroyo's legacy of corruption, extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, bribery, election cheating, among others.

Human rights groups have criticized the Arroyo administration for human rights violations in its fight against communism and Muslim rebels. They have also criticized the government for denying the President's

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde called the letter "black propaganda," but said the President was willing to address the issues.

"The real audience of that letter was not really Barack Obama but the Filipino public, otherwise, if that was intended for Barack Obama, that should have been formally communicated, not in a paid full-page newspaper ad," Remonde said.

"Therefore, it is clear that letter is another attempt at besmirching and black propaganda against her," he added.

— With Marvin Sui and Rudy Santos