

'GMA used P800-M emergency fund for foreign trips'

President Arroyo used up the government's P800-million contingency fund for emergencies like calamities for her frequent foreign trips, Bukidnon Rep. Teofisto Guingona III revealed yesterday.

"She exhausted not only Malacañang's

travel funds but also the P800-million appropriation for emergencies in the 2008 national budget," he told radio station dzMM.

He said he based his revelation on a Commission on Audit (COA) report submitted to

By JESS DIAZ

Speaker Prospero Nograles this week.

"I have a copy of the report. An assistant commissioner of COA even briefed us on their shocking findings," he said.

Guingona said the COA findings show that the 2008 contingency fund was not enough for foreign travels and Mrs. Arroyo had to augment it by P120 million.

"The augmentation was also exhausted," he added.

Guingona also said the President overspent for her foreign travels between 2003 and 2007 by P1.6 billion. She has only P1.1 billion under the annual budgets but she spent P2.7 billion over that period, he said.

He said the House of Representatives should have discovered the excess spending during the budget hearings.

"But the House is dominated by the President's allies, so they just turn a blind eye," he said.

He accused the President of violating the annual budget law "because she could not augment what Congress had approved and authorized her to spend."

He said he would demand during the forthcoming budget hearings details on how and when Malacañang's travel funds and the appropriation for contingencies were used.

Mrs. Arroyo's latest foreign travel was her weeklong working visit to the United States two weeks ago.

It has become controversial largely due to at least two expensive dinners the President and her entourage of more than 50 enjoyed in posh restaurants in Washington and New York City.

Sen. Francis Escudero has criticized Mrs. Arroyo's frequent travels abroad, saying she has spent more than P3 billion in taxpayers' money for them.

Before her latest US visit, she "circumnavigated" the globe by flying to Tokyo, then to Los Angeles, Colombia, Brazil, Dubai, and Hong Kong before returning to Manila, he said.

According to former Senate president Ernesto Maceda, Mrs. Arroyo has spent a total of P5.5 billion for more than 50 foreign trips she has made since 2001.

In a recent television interview, Maceda said appropriations in the annual budgets for the President's trips totaled P3.5 billion.

"In addition to these, there are contingency funds that could be used for foreign travel. Mrs. Arroyo has realigned a total of P2.2 billion of these funds for her foreign trips," he said.

He said he got his data from the Department of Budget and Management and the Senate finance committee, of which he was chairman for five years.

He added that Escudero's P3-billion figure apparently did not include realignments from the contingency funds.

Meanwhile, Quezon Rep. Danilo Suarez confirmed yesterday that President Arroyo and her large entourage had

another expensive dinner in New York City other than the controversial \$20,000 meal at the posh Le Cirque French restaurant.

"Yes, there was a second dinner in New York City the next time. I had other engagements," he said.

He could not say where it was exactly or how much the presidential entourage paid.

Text messages purportedly coming from a staff member of the Philippine embassy in Washington claim that Mrs. Arroyo's party enjoyed two dinners at Le Cirque.

The embassy supposedly paid for the New York City dinners, including the controversial meal on Aug. 2, for which Press Secretary Cergé Remonde claimed Le Rep. Martin Romualdez shelled out \$20,000.

The messages also claim it was the embassy that paid for a \$3,500-a-night suite for the President and 60 \$950-a-night rooms for her congressional companions at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, where former First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos used to stay.

Suarez and Rep. Romualdez are among Mrs. Arroyo's favorite congressional companions whenever she travels abroad.

On Thursday, Suarez claimed that he was the one who paid \$15,000 for steaks and lobsters at a Washington DC restaurant last July 30.

COA audit pushed

For a left-wing lawmaker, the Commission on Audit should form a special audit team to review the "lavish" spending of President Arroyo in her US trip.

Bayan Muna Rep. Teddy Casinó personally went to the office of COA chairman Reynaldo Villar and handed him a two-page letter containing his request. He said he merely wanted the "whole truth about the controversies surrounding the US trip."

He also invoked Republic Act 6713, or the Code of Conduct for Public Officials, which may have been violated by government officials who had partaken of the expensive meals in New York and Washington.

"Like most of our countrymen, I wonder, what other lavish expenses were made by the Philippine delegation?" he asked. Casinó finds the meal expenses "irregular, unnecessary, excessive, extravagant and/or unconscionable even if bills were footed by a private entity."

Casinó, fellow Bayan Muna Rep. Satur Ocampo and Gabriela Rep. Liza Maza filed House Resolution 1315 that seeks to direct the House committee on good government to conduct an inquiry on the matter.

Casinó said it is as well "within the jurisdiction of COA to determine, through a special audit, if public funds were irregularly used and if laws and policies were violated."

Analopawis Rep. Joel Maglonsod said Malacañang must present to the public a detailed accounting of all expenses of the President's state and working travels abroad, including her latest trip to the US.

"The people deserve to know how much the President spent for her foreign travels," he said.

"The expensive dinner at Le Cirque and the meal at Bobby Van's Steak House in Washington are just the tip of the iceberg. Mrs. Arroyo and her entourage are definitely spending more than what they should during their junkies," Maglonsod added.

"Whether the meals were paid for by private individuals or government officials, Mrs. Arroyo has a lot of explaining to do about her expenses during her trips and her swelling wealth," he said.

"It is evident that Mrs. Arroyo and other public officials joining working and state visits violated Republic Act 6713 or the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees," Maglonsod said.

No excuse

"The report that the consulate in New York has been asked to foot the bill is disturbing, and if true, exposes the scam behind Malacañang's claim that taxpayer's money was not spent for the Le Cirque dinner," Makati City Mayor and opposition leader Jejomar Binay said. - With Delon Porcalla, Christina Mendez, Jose Rodol Ciprano