

GMA scraps jet purchase

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo scrapped yesterday plans to buy a new presidential jet worth P1.2 billion amid criticism of her administration's spending priorities during an economic crisis.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, in an interview over the government-run *Radyo ng Bay-*

an, said this was not the first time Mrs. Arroyo made such a decision on such a purchase despite several recommendations for her to acquire a brand-new executive jet.

"I'm formally announcing that the President has ordered the cancellation of the purchase

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of presidential jet," Remonde said.

He said Mrs. Arroyo gave the directive "because she did not want others to say that she was prioritizing her needs even if it would benefit her successor more."

"I think it's practical that she do so (cancel)," Remonde said.

He said the Air Force's Presidential Airlift Wing (PAW) has recommended several times the acquisition of a brand new executive jet for use of the Chief Executive but Mrs. Arroyo had shelved the recommendation "several times in the past."

The President and her entourage were earlier criticized for spending thousands of dollars for dining in expensive restaurants in New York and Washington.

The Palace maintained that Mrs. Arroyo was merely invited and administration lawmakers paid for the meals using their private funds.

The Palace last week justified the plan to buy a brand new jet saying it would also benefit Mrs. Arroyo's successors and greatly reduce security risks and other dangers of Philippine presidents using aging planes or chartering aircraft for their use.

The Office of the President (OP) earlier published notice of biddings for a "presidential fixed-wing executive jet" that must be factory new, with two turbo-fan engines pressurized and equipped with avionics and instruments that are prescribed and compliant with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and International

Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards.

The aircraft was supposed to be for delivery at the end of the year following the bidding process that starts this month before the President cancelled the plan.

Presidential economic spokesperson Gary Olivar said the OP does not own a fixed-wing aircraft that Mrs. Arroyo can use in her official local and foreign visits.

He said the PAW has two planes, the currently used F-28 jet and the F-27, a propeller-driven aircraft that is undergoing maintenance checks.

The F-28 and the F-27 are 29 years old and 50 years old, respectively, and therefore costly to maintain, Olivar pointed out.

"Under the present arrangement, the PAW needs at least two fixed-wing jets for every presidential engagement," Olivar told a news briefing. "With only one available, the OP has to charter civilian aircraft to address the airlift requirements of the President.

"This is not only very costly but also poses high-security risk that may jeopardize life and limb of the President," he said.

"The Presidency, being the highest position in the entire government bureaucracy, is the symbol of national pride and dignity. It is but fitting and proper that whoever is the sitting President, should be afforded proper amenities befitting his/her position as head of state," Olivar said, adding that "his or her personal safety and security is one of the prime considerations of the State."