

GMA's US dinner host admits applying for P1-B loan

By JESS DIAZ

Oust Nograles

Meanwhile, Suarez called for the ouster of Nograles as Speaker for failure to carry out an agreement in the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (Ledac) for the approval by the House of at least two new tax measures.

"There's something wrong with the House leadership when it comes to revenue measures. Nothing is happening to these bills," he told the Serye Café news forum in Quezon City.

He said had Nograles kept his promise of shepherding the two measures—higher sin taxes and the metering of services of mobile phone companies—the country's budget deficit for the first half of the year would not have soared to P188 billion.

Sought for comment, Nograles said, "Well, just because he pays for expensive dinners does not mean he can change the leadership in the

House, does it?"

"Is he implying or does he mean he can run the House better?" he asked.

"Personally, I suggest that if he has complaints, he should take it up with the leadership and not complain to media. I am really trying my best to work hard and things are not perfect," he said.

Suarez said the surge in the deficit, as reported by Finance Secretary Margarito Teves, is "alarming" because it will entail higher borrowing costs.

He said Ledac agreed on the need for the approval of the two measures during a meeting in Malacañang more than three months ago.

Suarez stressed that aside from Nograles, Antique Rep. Exequiel Javier, ways and means committee chairman, should also be removed for sitting on the tax measures.

He did not say who among his colleagues

should take over Nograles' and Javier's positions if they are booted out.

He said that if the committee chairman does not endorse the bills soon, he would propose that the measures be retrieved from the committee and taken up in plenary.

"With the May 2010 elections fast approaching, we are now running out of time," he stressed.

The President voiced her wish for higher sin taxes during her State of the Nation Address last July 27.

But according to former Department of Finance undersecretary Milwida Guevarra, such advocacy was just "lip service" since Mrs. Arroyo blocked previous DOF proposals for higher rates after meeting with manufacturers at her family's Forbes Park home.

Guevarra said Mrs. Arroyo could easily tell her House allies to approve the sin tax and mobile phone service metering bills if she is really serious about seeing the measures hurdle Congress.

Quezon Rep. Danilo Suarez admitted yesterday that his family corporation is applying for a P1-billion loan from the government-owned Development Bank of the Philippines and two other banks but stressed he was not trying to get President Arroyo's help for it when he paid for a lavish dinner for her and her entourage during her recent US visit.

Suarez was part of a 28-member delegation from the House of Representatives that accompanied Mrs. Arroyo and her husband to the US. Speaker Prospero Nograles led the delegation.

Suarez claimed it was he who paid \$15,000 for a dinner for Mrs. Arroyo and her party at Bobby Van's steak house in Washington, after the event was featured in a gossip column in the Washington Post.

He had even boasted that he usually treats the President and her husband to expensive lunches or dinners whenever they travel abroad. He is one of Mrs. Arroyo's favorite foreign travel companions.

Another dinner in New York City cost \$20,000. Malacañang said Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez footed the bill, but the congressman in turn pointed to his brother as the host.

The dinners have sparked public uproar in the country.

The STAR columnist Jarius Bondoc exposed the Suarez family corporation's loan.

As for Romualdez, Bondoc said the Leyte congressman is facing charges in connection with more than P130 million taken from a sequestered bank.

Suarez said his family corporation applied for the loan with DBP, Banco de Oro and another state firm, the Land Bank, more than four years ago.

He said the loan would be used to build a 10-megawatt power plant using coconut waste as fuel.

He said the banks are evaluating the project "based on its viability, and we think the plant is viable."

Suarez said he has never interfered in the banks' decision-making process or lobbied with Malacañang for the loan's approval.

But he admitted having discussed the plant's potential for generating jobs with Mrs. Arroyo "in one Cabinet meeting more than two years ago."

As for their US trip, Suarez said he did not know who paid for it.

He said he is willing to reimburse the expenses using personal funds but does not know whom to reimburse.

Nograles earlier said that since the trip was an invitation from the US government, he assumed the US shouldered the expenses.

But US embassy spokesperson Rebecca Thompson denied the US government spent for Mrs. Arroyo and her entourage and said the US provided only security protection for the President.