

GMA urged to extend oil price freeze to Visayas, Mindanao

By JESS DIAZ

Two party-list congressmen urged President Arroyo yesterday to extend the freeze in the prices of oil products to Visayas and Mindanao.

Rep. Florencio "Bem" Noel of An Waray said people in Luzon are not the only ones suffering from the onslaught of recent typhoons.

"Those in the Visayas, particularly Eastern Visayas where I came from, are the first to be

hit by typhoons. Our people should also be protected from higher fuel prices," he said.

He said the President should expand the coverage of Executive Order 839, which freezes oil prices, to include Visayas and Mindanao.

Rep. Satur Ocampo of Bayan Muna said the President's order should protect all consumers.

"After all, no one is exempt-

ed from the impact of oil price increases," he said.

Ocampo said oil companies are going around Mrs. Arroyo's directive by increasing prices outside Luzon.

Former economic planning secretary Ralph Recto, on the other hand, said Visayas and Mindanao "should not bear the brunt of the temporary freeze in oil prices in calamity

areas."

"This variation of a cross-subsidy is unfair to areas that are economically less prosperous than Metro Manila. A Cebuano fisherman has the right to complain if the gas for his banca is more expensive than the gas a Makati resident loads in his sport utility vehicle," he said.

Recto, also a former senator,

said oil companies should not treat Visayas and Mindanao as "cost-recovery markets."

He noted that even before these companies announced plans to increase prices in the south, their products were also selling higher in many cities, including Cebu, Bacolod, Tacloban, and Cagayan de Oro.

Earlier, Speaker Prospero Nograles warned oil firms that the government can take over

them if they create a supply shortage by refusing to import oil.

He said the Constitution empowers the state to temporarily run public utilities and companies imbued with public interest, including oil firms, during times of calamity and emergency.

"I advise them strongly against testing this route," he said.