

# GMA withdraws Conejos appointment

By Vera Files

President Arroyo has recalled the appointment of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary for Migrant Affairs Esteban Conejos Jr. as Philippine representative to the United Nations in Geneva after the Union of Foreign Service Officers (UNIFORS) said his appointment violated foreign service rules. The union also said the appointment was "grossly insensitive" in view of the country's economic difficulties.

But in what foreign service officers see as a retaliatory move, Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo also relieved UNIFORS president Victoria Bataclan of her position as assistant secretary for European Affairs.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said Arroyo has recalled Conejos' appointment which she signed on Sept. 3. Conejos was supposed to leave for Geneva immediately in time for the Nov. 19 retirement of Ambassador Erlinda Basilio, the current representative to Geneva.

"He cannot leave. The original documents are with me," said Remonde, who is in possession of Conejos' appointment papers and travel order.

Asked to comment on Remonde's statement, Ed Malaya, spokesman of the Department of Foreign Affairs, said, "We will await confirmation on this matter. Undersecretary Conejos is a highly capable and extremely hardworking official who is well-versed in migrant workers' issues."

As to Bataclan's relief, Malaya said, "Just like in the military, our foreign service personnel are given different assignments in the course of their careers. We are rotated periodically to meet the requirements of the service."

## Bataclan asked GMA to recall Conejos' appointment

On Oct. 1, Bataclan, writing in behalf of UNIFORS, asked Arroyo to recall Conejos' appointment, saying it "will burden the Government with an additional expenditure in the range of \$70,000 for an appointee who will stay less than eight (8) months at post."

"Such kind of expenditure may be seen as grossly insensitive to the current mood of channeling all available resources towards relief and rebuilding for the victims of typhoon Ondoy," Bataclan added.

The \$70,000 that Bataclan cited is the amount it would cost the Department of Foreign Affairs to send a new ambassador to his posting abroad and install him in office.

Conejos, a political appointee, was defense undersecretary for operations before joining the DFA. His appointment to a new post would be co-terminus with Arroyo, whose term ends on June 30, 2010. This means he would be holding his new position for less than eight months.

DFA rules state that officers with less than three years left in the service are ineligible for foreign postings. Foreign service officers said it takes at least a year for a new ambassador to settle and establish contacts in a foreign post.

Early this year, the Philippine government also handed Conejos' bid for the position of deputy director general at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Conejos lost to Laura Thompson Chacón of Costa Rica.

The DFA said Romulo originally recommended Conejos to be ambassador to Brussels to replace Cristina Ortega who has completed her six-year stint in the European Union capital.

The Brussels assignment, however, needed confirmation by the Commission on Appointments. Sources said the DFA was concerned that Conejos might not be able to obtain CA approval.

A posting to the UN in Geneva does not have to go through the CA, following the example set by former Supreme Court Justice Hilario Davide, Philippine representative to the United Nations in New York, who did not get a confirmation from the congressional body.

In blocking Conejos' appointment, the 30-member UNIFORS also expressed concern that the DFA would breach the statutory limit set by the Foreign Service Act of 1991. The limit was meant to ensure that a majority of the country's diplomatic and permanent missions shall be headed by career ambassadors.

Romulo, however, insisted that "Conejos' appointment is valid as it is also within the limit set by law."

Meanwhile, Bataclan also resigned as member of the Bids and Awards Committee and the Special Hearing Panel tasked to hear administrative cases against DFA personnel and officers.

Romulo appointed Leslie Baja as acting assistant secretary of European Affairs. Bataclan was not given a new assignment.

"She will join the Navy," quipped a foreign service officer, referring to those on "floating" status. Putting foreign service officers on floating status was a practice rampant during the term of former foreign secretary Raul Manglapus when those who were perceived as having been close to former President Ferdinand Marcos were not given assignments.

## Conejos recall not yet final

Malacañang said the President has not yet made a final decision on Conejos' case.

"There is no action yet. I have not gotten instructions yet from the President. I should know," Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita told *The STAR* in a telephone interview.

He, however said he has not recently talked with Romulo on the particular issue.

He said Romulo has "given good words" on Conejos, who was earlier conferred the Order of Sikatuna by Mrs. Arroyo for exemplary service, before union leaders.

Ermita and Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo also relies on the recommendation of Romulo in such matters.

"She has the highest respect for the career diplomatic service," Remonde said. "The Arroyo administration has among the best records of professionalism in the foreign service."

Meanwhile, the DFA neither confirmed nor denied that Malacañang has withdrawn the appointment of Conejos.

DFA sources said Assistant Secretary Bataclan was served on Friday a copy of the relief order, signed by Secretary Romulo, effective immediately.

They believed the relief of Bataclan was to get back at her for raising to the President the protest and concerns of the foreign service corps on the appointment of Conejos, with the strong backing of Romulo, and non-career appointees.

"Also, Bataclan received the order last Friday, effective immediately," an official who asked not to be named told *The STAR*.

Another official said no reason was cited in the order noting it is part of the system of designation and rotation but the order did not state the division. Bataclan was being transferred to.

Executive Director Baja of the Office of the European Affairs was named acting assistant secretary.

Sources said Bataclan sent a text message to her colleagues in the department to inform them that she had been relieved.

DFA spokesman Malaya confirmed yesterday the relief of Bataclan, saying it is part of the normal periodic rotation among foreign service personnel and she will be given a new designation in "due time."

"It's merely part of our rotation in the expediency of the service," Malaya said in a telephone interview.

He explained that Bataclan is not under suspension and she retained the chief of mission rank.

Malaya said the DFA still has no information if Malacañang already withdrew the appointment of Conejos.

— With File, Lee Juan, Paolo Ramon