

OFWs cited as champions of economic development

PRESIDENT Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has never failed to meet with Filipino workers whenever she travels abroad, citing them for their contribution to the economy.

During her recent visit to Japan, the President hailed the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) for the sacrifices they are making for the country, calling them "champions of our country's force in economic development."

And when she flew to Bahrain a few days later, she said: "Aside from helping your country's economy, you should also be considered as Filipino overseas investors. This is because of the OFWs' P8-billion investment to the Philippines every year."

During a gathering attended by some 1,000 Filipino workers at the Takanawa Prince Hotel in Tokyo, the President cited the 4.4 percent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) and 5.9 percent climb in gross national product (GNP) in the third quarter, emphasizing that these came about with help from OFW remittances.

The meeting with the Filipino community capped the President's two-day working visit to Japan to attend the ASEAN-Ja-

pan Commemorative Summit.

In her speech, the President gave credit to the almost 300,000 OFWs in Japan for their donations and pledges for classrooms to be built in the country and for their tourism volunteer program that has accounted for some 300,000 visitors from Japan, making it the country's second largest source of tourists.

In return and in appreciation of the big boost provided by OFWs, the President told them she has pursued programs to help them, like the overseas voting, dual citizenship and the anti-money laundering laws.

The President informed them that their number could increase as a result of her initial talks with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that could allow more Filipinos in the health care and information technology sectors to work in Japan.

HOUSING PROGRAM

There is also the housing program on easy installment terms for OFWs, she said, so they can build houses for their families and settle in the country during their retirement.

The President vowed to move the country forward and use the

experience she gained in her two-and-a-half years to keep the deficit under control, maintain the low inflation rate, increase tax revenues, and fight government corruption.

In Bahrain, the President told the members of the Filipino community that their remittances are used for housing and education of their families in the Philippines, which could be likened to investments.

She said her administration has expanded the housing program.

President Macapagal-Arroyo also said that her administration. "At isang dahilan ay dahil maraming bumibili ng pabahay sa mga OFW. Hinihimok ko kayo na ilagay ang inyong naimpok na pera sa mga makabuluhang bagay, kagaya ng pabahay. Makipag-ugnay kayo sa Embahada kung paano pumasok sa programa ng Pag-Ibig Fund (I opted to expand the government's housing program, since most of the buyers are families of OFWs. I urge OFWs to invest their hard-earned money in buying houses for their families and avail themselves of the government's housing program through the Pag-IBIG Fund)," the President said.

Dollar remittances from OFWs grew 5.7 percent for the January to October period, and may reach \$7.6 billion by yearend as the number of Filipinos leaving for higher-paying jobs in the health-care and other industries climbed.

"Sa inyong lahat, maraming salamat sa mga remittances. Maraming salamat sa magandang reputasyon na binibigay ninyo sa Pilipinas, Maraming salamat sa patuloy ng pagmamahal ninyo sa ating bansa. At Merry Christmas, minamahal kayo ng bansang Pilipinas, (To all of you, thank you very much for the remittances. Thank you very much for the good reputation that you are giving the Philippines, Thank you very much for the OFWs, love for our country. Merry Christmas, your country loves you)," the President said.