

GMA taps 'middle forces'

By MARICHU VILLANUEVA

Besieged with criticisms from what she described as the Left and Right, President Arroyo declared yesterday that the country's "middle forces" are fully supportive of her efforts to rebuild the country through the setting up of a "strong Republic."

The President admitted that her 17-month-old administration still faces "a lot of problems" and "many things" should be done to address various concerns.

In an interview with the early morning television program *Alas Singko y Medya* on ABS-CBN, the President's drum beating of the supposed support by the "middle forces" came on the heels of a string of criticisms from leftist groups and supporters of ousted leader Joseph Estrada.

Critics of Mrs. Arroyo have harped on the deteriorating peace and order situation, her failure to generate one million jobs and the government's inability to meet targets she imposed in her first State of the Nation Address (SONA).

"Those who criticize me come from the left and the right. Those from the left come from the communist (ranks) while those from the right come from Erap forces. It is really the left and the right," the President said of her detractors.

"But the middle forces, as you have seen the other day, still support me," she said.

Although the President did not specifically identify the "middle forces," she was obviously alluding to the strong support given her by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the Kon-

greso ng Mamamayang Pilipino (Kompil) – an alliance of people's organizations and non-government organizations – and some of her EDSA II allies.

The CBCP rallied behind the President on Sunday, saying there was no credible alternative to her leadership and even warning her political foes against staging an "artificially created people power" to oust her. The crucial endorsement came as surveys revealed her slipping popularity.

Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, CBCP president, said in a statement: "Right now, it would seem to me that the best option for the country is for President Arroyo to finish her term and be allowed to succeed without nit-picking by the opposition and by some sectors of media, and without needless political infighting."

The public is becoming disenchanted with Mrs. Arroyo due to a spate of kidnappings-for-ransom and her pledge to honor onerous power supply contracts previous administrations had signed with private power producers, which are being blamed for the high cost of electricity. Her public approval rating slipped to 42.6 percent last month, compared to 48 percent in March.

The President said she "does not seek

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enemies," but she needs "to defend the Republic of the Philippines and to protect the Office of the President."

Mrs. Arroyo confessed to getting "hurt" by criticisms from her opponents and that she was "saddened" that other people are hurt in the exchange of stinging political criticisms. She said she hopes that those affected will be able to recover eventually and that they will see that the country is becoming stable under her leadership.

Again she did not name people who get "hurt" but

she apparently referred to Pastor "Boy" Saycon, secretary general of the Council on Philippine Affairs (COPA), whom she labeled a "termite" destroying her government. She demanded that Saycon resign from the board of the Philippine Deposit Insurance Corp. following his attacks on her.

In another bid to corner media coverage yesterday, Malacañang hosted a breakfast forum on the so-called "Milestone Report of President's Arroyo's SONA 2001." The forum was attended by journalists from print, television and radio companies and was broadcast live by the state-run *Channel 4* and *ABS-CBN ANC News Channel*.

Quashing claims by her political rivals, the President said "there is no truth" to suggestions that she did not accomplish her SONA pledges.

"Despite many problems that we face in and out of the country, the Cabinet went on to do its job and because

of what it did, we have achieved a lot of things," she said.

The President cited that the government created more than one million jobs through programs and projects focusing on agricultural modernization, micro-credit financing, housing, information and communication technology and tourism, among others.

"Once fears of investors in the country are erased, I believe we would be in good running condition," she said.

Mrs. Arroyo reiterated concerns raised by the Makati Business Club on peace and order problems, notably rising incidents of kidnappings and "white collar" crimes such as smuggling and tax evasion.

COPA leaders vow loyalty to Arroyo

Former Tarlac congressman Jose Cojuangco and his wife, former Tarlac Gov. Margarita Cojuangco, senior leaders of COPA, met with Mrs. Arroyo yesterday to reiterate their support and loyalty to her.

The meeting took place roughly a week after the President formally severed ties with Saycon.

After the meeting at Malacañang, Cojuangco said, "COPA is not out there to oust the President. We're supportive but the system of support is different from other groups. The members of COPA speak out. We will always speak if we think we need to speak out."

Saycon earned the ire of Mrs. Arroyo when he publicly rejected suggestions that close supporters of Estrada are being recruited to join the Palace inner circle.

He said the issue of the President calling Saycon a "termite" is already closed and that Saycon and the entire COPA would observe henceforth "silence" on this particular topic.

"Let's look forward to something else," he said.

Kompil leaders have described COPA as "one small organization" whose views should be heard, but "should not rock the boat in terms of the whole politics and none of them are even elected officials."