

Arroyo: I kept my SONA promises

She kept her promises, but there is still much to do.

President Arroyo said yesterday she delivered on the promises she made in her maiden State of the Nation Address (SONA) last year, even as ousted and jailed former President Joseph Estrada said she had failed the country.

Mrs. Arroyo said she made many political enemies who are now trying to derail her efforts to reform

the government and shore up the economy.

Since she assumed the presidency after the EDSA II uprising that deposed Estrada in January 2001, Mrs. Arroyo said she made good on her promise to create two million jobs in the agriculture sector and build 100,000 houses for the poor.

Estrada's counter-SONA statement was delivered before his supporters at the Club Filipino in Greenhills,

San Juan. In his statement, recorded at Estrada's detention cell at the Veterans Memorial Medical Center in Quezon City, Estrada said: "The elite and powerful have advanced their interest, effectively controlling government and its leadership."

The recorded statement was dubbed by Estrada supporters as the "true state of the nation" address. Estrada was introduced as

"the president of the Philippines."

"It is true that we still have many problems, so there is much we still have to do," Mrs. Arroyo said. "It is important investors will not be afraid to come to our country. Once they are no longer afraid of our country, then things will run more smoothly."

The President was reacting to the statement issued

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by US Ambassador to Manila Francis Ricciardone that the perception of massive corruption in government is driving investors away, as were rampant kidnappings of foreign and local businessmen.

Mrs. Arroyo's Cabinet was quick to come to her defense, even as they admitted to shortfalls in the delivery of the President's SONA promises.

Proud despite shortfalls

Senior Consultant on Poverty Alleviation and Good Governance Victoria Garchitorena said there were shortfalls in the SONA accomplishments besides the peace and order promises and high power rates cited by the President: "So these shortfalls are the areas of concern which we hope to address this year."

Garchitorena added, however, that the Cabinet is "very proud, by and large, of the SONA targets we've achieved." Mrs. Arroyo earlier said she has achieved 85 percent of her SONA pledges.

Garchitorena, whose office monitors the SONA accomplishment reports of each department, said other shortcomings of the Arroyo administration were noted in the areas of the distribution of lands in ancestral domains and the lifting of the National Food Authority's (NFA) rice import monopoly.

"With President Arroyo setting the pace, everybody really has to work hard," Garchitorena added, "however, we must admit we're not perfect."

Interior and Local Government Secretary Jose Lina Jr., however, strongly refuted points raised by CNN correspondent in the Philippines Maria Ressa, who said public perception on the performance of the Arroyo administration does not match the claims made by the Cabinet that they have met and exceeded their respective SONA targets.

"Targets have been met (and), in fact, exceeded in many parts. But why is perception still as you have put it? We need to communicate better ... we cannot radically change the situation overnight," Lina said.

"This administration has been here for only one year and six months and, with a poverty level of 42 percent of the entire population, it's impossible to radically change the situation," Lina added.

Lina said the Arroyo administration managed to reduce the projected budget deficit from P220 million to P147 million.

Lina also said the "sound fiscal management" undertaken by the Arroyo administration has produced results: the inflation and interest rates plunged to record lows and the peso stabilized at P50 to \$1.

"In short, the foundation is there. We have a leadership that has been able to improve the international credit rating of the country within a period of a few months, when we achieved that target of reducing the budget deficit," he added.

Health Secretary Manuel Dayrit said the President's SONA pledge to make essential drugs cheaper was fulfilled by the Department of Health's (DOH) implementation of the Gamot, Mabisa at Abot Kaya 50 program. The GMA 50 program involves the distribution of essential and commonly purchased drugs at 30 to 70 percent less than branded drugs of the same type.

The DOH, in cooperation with the Philippine International Trading Corp. of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), has just distributed 29 more drugs to government hospitals that were imported from India, in addition to the eight antibiotic, anti-hypertensive,

asthma control and diabetes therapy drugs imported from the subcontinent and distributed to government hospitals in 2001.

Under this drug price reduction program, the DOH aims to do away with the drug distributors and "middlemen" in the pharmaceutical industry that drive up the prices of essential medicines.

The DOH also plans to eliminate the exorbitant markups imposed by local drugstore retail giants by selling the GMA 50 drugs at government hospitals. By the end of 2002, the DOH will have made a total of 42 high-quality, affordable essential drugs available to the public.

Freedom of illusion

Meanwhile, the Palace shrugged off the counter-SONA of Estrada, in which the jailed former president accused Mrs. Arroyo of allowing kidnappings for ransom to increase.

Speaking for the President, Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye said the government would not stop Estrada from making his SONA statements: "We cannot stop Estrada from speaking because this is a free country. As long as Estrada makes his statements peacefully... he is entitled to his illusion."

Bunye said the same policy applies to Estrada's supporters from the People's Movement Against Poverty (PMAP) and the ex-president's political allies who have vowed to deliver their own counter-SONA statements before and after the Mrs. Arroyo's second SONA at the opening of Congress on Monday.

Bunye said the President will focus mainly on putting an end to kidnapping and other major crimes that have put the Philippines in a bad light as far as international perception of the country's peace and order situation is concerned.

Opposition Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, meanwhile, has asked Mrs. Arroyo to prioritize the improvement of the country's peace and order situation and poverty alleviation program.

"There must be law and order. It should be followed by a poverty alleviation program, because, if the people are hungry, discord will surely follow," he said.

Meanwhile, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) said it will reactivate Task Force Libra as part of its security preparations for the President's SONA on Monday.

AFP vice chief Lt. Gen. Gregorio Camiling said: "Task Force Libra will be on standby for any eventuality that might occur during the SONA."

During the SONA, Camiling said, both the AFP and the Philippine National Police (PNP) will intensify security efforts and measures to prevent violence from erupting between pro-government and anti-government demonstrators who are slated to air their sentiments outside the Batasang Pambansa Complex as the President delivers her SONA.

Task Force Libra is the designated standby force augmenting the PNP, which is fielding 8,000 police officers in key areas of Metro Manila to maintain peace and order.

Task Force Libra was the first law enforcement unit to show force in the May 1, 2001 riots staged by Estrada supporters seeking Mrs. Arroyo's ouster from Malacañang and Estrada's reinstatement to the helm of government. The riots were eventually quelled by combined police and military forces less than 24 hours after they began.

— Marichu Villanueva, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Christina Mendez, Rainier Ronda, AFP