

GMA cites Melo's competence, credibility

By MARVIN SY

President Arroyo confirmed yesterday her appointment of retired Supreme Court associate justice Jose Melo as chairman of the Commission on Elections (Comelec), calling him "a very credible person."

Various groups and legislators also welcomed his appoint-

ment to the Comelec's top post.

In a conversation over coffee with members of the Philippine media in Davos, Switzerland, the President said it was chiefly Melo's achievement as chairman of the fact-finding commission on reported political kill-

ings in the country that convinced her of his competence in leading the Comelec. The fact-finding body, created on Aug. 21, 2006, eventually became known as the Melo Commission.

"Well, you see how credible

he was in his Melo report. All, even the United Nations, they all took off from his own report. And when we religiously carried out his recommendations, the unexplained killings went down by 83 percent in one year," the President said. She is

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in Davos for the World Economic Forum.

Government security forces were widely believed to be responsible for most of the killings of leftist activists and crusading journalists. Administration critics say Mrs. Arroyo should be held responsible for the murders.

A preliminary report submitted to the President by the Melo Commission in February last year tagged "certain groups or interests as possibly responsible for the killings of media personnel and activists." The report carried recommendations that Mrs. Arroyo claimed she followed to address the problem and to appease concerned international rights groups.

Melo, 75, takes over from Benjamin Abalos Sr. who was forced to an early retirement late last year in the wake of allegations that he helped ZTE Corp. of China bag the contract for the government's national broadband network project. Mrs. Arroyo has since cancelled the deal even as her officials insisted that everything in it was above-board. Abalos' seven-year term as Comelec chief ends on Feb. 2.

Deputy presidential spokes-

person Lorelei Fajardo said over *dzRB* that Melo's capability and integrity were beyond question and that he underwent a stringent screening process.

She said Malacañang is confident the public will accept Melo's appointment.

"The President knows whether a person is qualified or not. After all she will be accountable at the end of the day," Fajardo said.

Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Sergio Apostol said he expects the appointment of Melo to unify the country and prove the administration's determination to reform the electoral system.

He said Melo should work double-time in automating the election in time for the presidential polls in 2010.

PPCRV, prelates happy

The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) expressed elation yesterday over President Arroyo's appointment of Melo.

"I am glad. He is a nominee of PPCRV. He will bring the wisdom of experience in putting in place election reforms in the Comelec. The qualifications

we used — integrity, competence, independence — blend well with Justice Melo," PPCRV national chairman Henrietta de Villa said.

"We are expecting that his independence and experience as a justice will bring good performance to the Comelec and his untainted image would change the image of the Comelec and we hope that he can restore the trust and confidence of the people in the electoral system," PPCRV legal counsel Howard Calleja said over *dzRB*.

Butuan Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos said Melo's appointment spells a "new beginning" for the scandal-tainted Comelec.

"I am happy for his integrity, transparency and intelligence. I hope that could be a new beginning at the Comelec with his leadership," Pueblos said over *Radio Veritas*. He also praised Melo for being a "good listener."

He advised Melo to work with the same zeal and integrity as he did when he was chairman of the Melo Commission.

Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Oscar Cruz, on the other hand, said he could not say if he was satisfied with Melo's appointment because he was not familiar with the other contenders.

"How can I say if he is better

than the rest if I don't know the list? There is no transparency in this matter," he said. "But perhaps he is the most qualified among those on the list."

Choice of Abalos?

Sen. Richard Gordon said there was lack of transparency in the appointment of Melo, as he vowed to make him pass through the "eye of a needle" in the Commission on Appointments.

Gordon said he was not comfortable with the closeness of Melo to the President and that he would review the Melo Commission report on extrajudicial killings to gauge the quality of his performance and even his biases.

"We have to look at what happened there, his impartiality," Gordon said.

"He must have the integrity, reasonably independent of political control, must be informationally savvy and innovative in terms of technology," said Gordon, chairman of the Senate committee on constitutional amendments, revision of codes and laws.

"He must have the energy, drive and will to reinvent and clean up the Comelec," he added.

He said that the ability to implement the Automated Elec-

tion Law should be a key criterion in selecting a Comelec chairman.

Gordon decried the lack of public participation in the selection of the next Comelec chief.

"What is this all about? Why are they not transparent? There should have been a buffet of people so the public will be thoroughly prepared for the next chairman," he said.

Gordon, a member of the CA, said he would scrutinize the credentials and qualifications of Melo and other new Comelec officials to ensure that all information that Malacañang denied the public during the selection process would be ultimately brought to light.

Sen. Panfilo Lacson, for his part, alleged that Melo was a nominee of Abalos under whose term the Comelec suffered a serious credibility problem.

But Sen. Manuel Roxas II welcomed the appointment of Melo, saying, "He is a champion of human rights."

Roxas said that based on Melo's background as head of the commission that investigated extrajudicial killings in the country, the retired SC justice is fit for the Comelec job.

"I am very confident that Justice Melo will uphold the same courage and professionalism as when he issued the report on extrajudicial killings," he said.

"Justice Melo is efficient, intelligent and has the integrity to lead (the Comelec). He has made good decisions for the people and this is why he will do in fulfilling his duty as chairman of the Comelec," Roxas said.

"He has a lot to fix in the

Comelec, reforms to undertake. We hope he will do all these soon and with much perseverance," he said.

More praises

"We welcome whoever is appointed by the President to the Comelec. It is her prerogative and we respect her decision," said Comelec spokesman James Jimenez.

He said he and other Comelec officials promised to "shorten the learning curve" for Melo who turns 76 in May.

"We'll inform him of what we are doing at the Comelec, the plans and challenges that we face. As soon as he assumes office, we'll make sure that he hits the ground running," he told *The STAR*.

Asked if Melo's age will not be a hindrance to his duties and responsibilities as Comelec chief, Jimenez expressed confidence that Melo would be up to the task.

"I don't think it's the age but the mental acuity. The work at the Comelec is very stressful. You may only be sitting there but your mind is working so hard. You just have to plan it well. I think he can do it," he added.

Two Comelec commissioners — Romeo Brawner and Nicodemus Ferrer — are in their seventies. Comelec commissioner Rene Sarmiento also welcomed Melo's appointment.

"His stature is something to be looked upon. He will be bringing to Comelec his unquestionable experience and expertise. And I think he is committed to (initiating reforms) in our electoral system," he said. — With Aurea Calica, Evelyn Macalran and Pia Lee-Brago