

Makati crowd demands GMA resignation

By MICHAEL PUNONGBAYAN

The protest rally at the busy financial district of Makati yesterday paled in comparison to the first two EDSA people power protests that ousted two presidents, but the same message – step down – came loud and clear.

It was echoed by a broad

spectrum of forces calling for President Arroyo's resignation and showing disgust over corruption allegations linking top officials and the President's husband.

Police estimated the crowd at 10,000, composed mainly of left-

leaning organizations, students, religious groups and a trickle of political personalities.

The protest was sparked by a Senate inquiry on alleged kickbacks in the national broadband network (NBN) deal by a bevy of personalities close to Mala-

cañang.

Religious leaders sang songs and read prayers from a stage set up along Ayala Avenue, while protesters waved placards and posters denouncing the President. Some even wore badges that read, "Moderate

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Your Greed," in an apparent reference to Commission on Higher Education Romulo Neri's instruction to Senate witness Rodolfo Lozada Jr.

But political analysts said the conspicuous absence of high profile politicians showed that the political elite did not believe Mrs. Arroyo, who had already survived three impeachment bids and at least three coup plots, could be pushed out of office at this time.

Some political figures, in what could be a sign that the protesters lacked a rallying point, even voiced their contempt for Vice President Noli de Castro.

De Castro was earlier urged to assume office in case the President either resigns or is forced out of office.

"It appears it's only the activist left that came out in full force. If the opposition cannot even come together, how can they bring Gloria down?" said Benito Lim, a political science professor at the University of the Philippines.

Father Joe Dizon of the Solidarity Movement said it is not true that "communal action" means simply praying for better government, much like what a fellow protest from the "Diocese of Malacañang" is saying.

He said the people of the Church joined the rally to be with the people and support them in their desire for change.

"*Sasamahan namin kayo sa gusto ninyong mangyari. Bayan, magkilos na kayo* (We will be with you in your aspirations. Act now)," Dizon told the crowd while giving assurance that more Church people will be supporting them in the coming days.

AFP on nationwide alert

Troops and armored vehicles were deployed to Manila and nearby military camps yesterday to beef up security and show readiness for any contingency.

The military leadership augmented its troops at the Army headquarters in Fort Bonifacio, ready to intervene in case the anti-government mass protest in nearby Makati became unruly.

Maj. Gen. Fernando Mesa, National Capital Region Command (NCRCOM) chief, said the reinforcements were called not only because of the rallies but also because of reported plans by communist rebels to infiltrate the ranks of protesters.

Police and military troops in Central Luzon were also placed on heightened alert and positioned at tollgates along the North Luzon Expressway to monitor possible mobilization of sectoral groups that will join the Makati rally.

Up north, AFP Northern Luzon Command (Nolcom) chief Lt. Gen. Rodrigo Maclang directed his two division commanders to "maintain vigilance because the communist terrorists might take advantage of the situation and stage lightning attacks against unwary targets."

Citing "rumors of unauthor-

ized troop movements" in his area, Maclang urged "people with other intents to stop dragging the AFP into compromising issues so that they can focus on their sworn mandate of protecting the nation and the civil liberties of all Filipinos."

He also cited "calls of some misguided groups" for the people to join the mass action but did not deny the rumors of troop movements.

Maclang, however, gave a stern warning that "anyone of his men who will get involved in any destabilization move will be meted due punishment."

The alertness that the military has shown came in response to calls made by detained Marine and Scout Ranger chief, Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim and Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV for all sectors, including men in uniform, to join protest actions calling for President Arroyo's removal from office.

Army chief Lt. Gen. Alexander Yano personally presided over the deployment of troops at the Army's parade grounds ahead of the scheduled rally at 3 p.m. yesterday.

A company of Army Scout Rangers from Bulacan and a company from the Light Armor Brigade (LAB) from Capas, Tarlac, were also deployed at the Army main camp to reinforce its defenses.

These elite troops were called in to reinforce troops of the National Capital Region Command (NCRCO) the other night to assist the territorial military and police troops in thwarting the reported communist plot to sabotage yesterday's mass protests.

"In light of the current developments, we are mustering the troops for the much needed security guidance from General Yano," Lt. Col. Ernesto Torres Jr., Army spokesman said.

Torres declined to give the exact number of troops now based at Fort Bonifacio but said they are enough to respond to any exigencies.

Yano earlier declared that the military, as a professional organization, remains intact and in full support of the chain of command up to the commander-in-chief.

PNP unveils assassination plot on GMA

The Philippine National Police (PNP) was also placed on heightened alert even as Director General Avelino Razon Jr. downplayed the Makati rally and unveiled the details on the assassination plot on the President.

"I think people are tired of that kind of activity and they just want the country to move on and strengthen the economy, get a job, and the country to progress. People power and coup de état would only destruct our progress," he said.

Razon said there have been numerous text messages of alleged bombings and troop movements and several "documents recovered from a parking lot outlining a plan to monitor several locations and individuals that includes the President."

GMA unperturbed

Meanwhile, President Arroyo blamed the current political turmoil to the jockeying for the presidency in 2010 even as she called on the political leaders to contribute to the country's stability.

In her speech at the economic briefing for the business sector at the Shangri-La Hotel in Makati City organized by the Investor Relations Office, the Manila Overseas Press Club and the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines, Mrs. Arroyo said it was not easy to work on protecting the economy from external challenges when there is political noise.

"We call on our political leaders of all parties and preferences to look to our future and ensure stability for the sake of the nation. Let us put aside partisan wrangling as candidates jockey for the presidency," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"Let us focus on a common agenda of growth, hope and opportunity that lifts up, rather than tears down, our nation at this important time in our history," she said.

She said the "work of governance is difficult" and "the ability to change the status quo is an uphill fight every day."

She vowed not to rest until she leaves office in 2010 to sustain the growth of the economy. "Though poverty has gone down, there are still too many poor. Though hunger has gone down, there are still too many hungry."

"There are still too many left out of our political processes. And there are too many (who) cloak themselves in easy rhetoric and lazy charges who would put personal ambition ahead of national progress," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"We have weathered a global transformation together as we fight to rise above the political noise in order to uplift the poor and dispossessed who deserve a rightful place at the table of economic opportunity and social justice," she said.

Following reports of a possible assassination plot against her, security around Mrs. Arroyo yesterday was noticeably tight. During her entire stay at the hotel, a helicopter from the Presidential Security Group hovered above and followed her convoy wherever it went.

She was also seen wearing a St. Benedict's medallion, believed to protect the wearer from danger.

Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye said he was not impressed with the turnout of the crowd in Makati City.

"We can see that the crowd is waning. What was the size of the crowd the last time? It was a little bigger than that," Bunye said.

He said the turnout in Makati validates the statement of the President that the people are tired of destabilization moves. —With reports from Jaime Laude, James Mananghaya, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Ding Cervantes, Jose Rodel Clapano, Dino Balabo, Paolo Romero, AP, AFP, Reuters