

GMA defends anti-graft record

President Arroyo defended her anti-corruption credentials yesterday after Senate star witness Rodolfo Lozada Jr. testified that she was at the center of the country's graft problems.

During the weekly Cabinet meeting, Mrs. Arroyo said she had allocated P3 billion to fight corruption in recent years and her government had spearheaded lifestyle checks of offi-

cial suspects of living beyond the means of their government salaries.

"Dozens of government officials had been removed and charged in court every year because of our lifestyle check," she said.

Mrs. Arroyo also took a "unity walk" with her Cabinet around Malacañang grounds yesterday to symbolize that

Turn to Page 8

GMA defends

From Page 1

they are united behind her leadership. Just before the start of the Cabinet meeting at Kalayaan Hall, Cabinet secretaries joined Mrs. Arroyo

in a stroll from the Premier Guest House. The Cabinet said they wanted to signify that they were standing by Mrs. Arroyo at this time when a new controversy is rocking her administration.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said the photo opportunity was meant to "show the people that there's no truth to the effort of people against her."

Ermita was referring to reports that a number of Mrs. Arroyo's Cabinet are planning to resign because of the national broadband controversy, just like what the so-called "Hyatt 10" did in July 2005. Hyatt 10 referred to the Cabinet members and bureau chiefs who resigned en masse because of various controversies

bounding Mrs. Arroyo and her administration.

A manifesto has surfaced signed by more than 60 former government officials calling on the Cabinet secretaries to resign.

Rumors have surfaced about some Cabinet members intending to heed the call just as Sen. Alan Peter Cayetano hinted that a Cabinet-level witness would be testifying during the next hearing on the NBN deal.

Ermita said the unity walk was just to emphasize what has already been stated by the Cabinet in their joint statement last Monday about standing together with Mrs. Arroyo.

Almost all of the Cabinet joined the unity walk, except for those who were on official leave like Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap, who is abroad, and Education Secretary Jesli Lapus, who arrived from abroad at around midnight yesterday.

Former senator Ralph Recto yesterday denied rumors that he was taking over the finance portfolio, replacing Secretary Margarito Teves. "I'm not looking for a job; I haven't been offered a job. I believe Gary Teves is doing a great job," he said.

Ermita also denied that Recto was offered the position. He confirmed that the Cabinet met last Monday night as a fellowship, not as a loyalty check.

Mrs. Arroyo dropped by late into the meeting to thank the Cabinet for their support after hearing about the joint statement and press briefing Monday afternoon.

Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye said that the dinner was basically a show of support for Mrs. Arroyo.

The Cabinet's signed joint statement was handed to Mrs. Arroyo during the dinner, he added.

Mrs. Arroyo thanked the Cabinet for their support and called on them to focus on the reforms being initiated by the government, Bunye said.

During yesterday's unity walk, Commission on Higher Education Chairman Romulo Neri was beside Mrs. Arroyo.

Allegations of graft and vote-fraud have scarred Mrs. Arroyo's presidency.

The latest scandal, over alleged kickbacks in the national broadband network deal with Chinese firm ZTE Corp. has revived calls for her resignation.

On Monday, Lozada told the Senate Mrs. Arroyo was "at the center of the web or ecosystem of corruption in the country."

Lozada had earlier testified that state contracts were usually overpriced by 22 percent to include kickbacks to state officials.

Lozada's testimony encouraged about 10,000 people to call for Mrs. Arroyo's resignation in a rally in Makati last week.

Opposition groups are planning another

rally on Feb. 25, the anniversary of the overthrow of President Ferdinand Marcos.

Governors back GMA

Provincial governors nationwide will lead separate rallies and hold dialogues at their capitols on Friday to show their support for Mrs. Arroyo.

Misamis Oriental Gov. Leo Ocampos, League of Provinces of the Philippines president, said the simultaneous activities will underscore the strong opposition of provincial leaders and their constituents to calls for Mrs. Arroyo to resign.

"Our people are tired of boisterous politics," he said in a statement.

"They are not happy over how the congressional inquiries brought about by the Lozada exposés have dragged the rest of the country. This political strife is very divisive for our people."

Ocampos said groups led by city and municipal mayors, non-governmental organizations and the religious sector will join the dialogues and rallies.

"This will be a gathering of people from all walks of life in the countryside who support the programs of the present administration and who will show their counterparts in Metro Manila that provincial folks are squarely behind President Arroyo," he said.

Ocampos said rural people are tired of being ignored by Metro Manila-based politicians and anti-government groups who are itching to grab power.

"This is not the kind of politics that Filipinos in the provinces appreciate because they know pretty well that any extra-constitutional action will negate all the economic gains the country is now enjoying," he said.

Ocampos said the 2010 presidential elections are only two and a half years away and that Mrs. Arroyo's mandate must be respected.

"It is really a matter of attitude," he said.

"We prefer to have peace and enjoy what we have at the moment. Progress will inevitably come, step by step. Everything depends on how we Filipinos prefer to live. Do we really want peace or trouble?"

Ocampos said the provincial forums will attempt to remind peace-loving Filipinos that the government is not sleeping on its job.

"As for us, we believe strongly that living in a democracy is the better option rather than risking our fragile lives fighting each other," he said.

Millions of pesos were reportedly given out during a meeting of local officials in Malacahang last year. — Marvin Sy, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Reuters