

In case of oil, food crisis

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo is preparing for the possibility of exercising her emergency powers under the 1987 Constitution in the event of a food and oil crisis in the country.

The President signed on June 2 Executive Order No. 728, which lays the groundwork for her exercising emergency powers through a newly created National Food and Energy Council (NFEC).

The order came as prices of food, particularly rice, and fuel continued to rise and hit poor and middle-income families nationwide.

Inflation also hit over nine percent last month, the highest in nine years, and the government has resorted to direct subsidies amounting to billions of pesos to impoverished families.

"The NFEC is tasked with assessing the food and energy situation and prospects, and formulating, coordinating, undertaking, monitoring and/or adjusting major national long-term policies, programs and projects as measures to ensure adequate, competitively priced supplies of food and energy for the nation, especially the very poor," the EO stated.

The President will chair the NFEC, with the Secretary of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) as vice chair.

The other members of the NFEC are the Secretaries of the Departments of Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources, Energy, and the heads of the National Anti-Poverty Commission, National Security Council, National Power Corp., and National Food Authority.

Mrs. Arroyo also invited

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heads of concerned committees in Congress, sectoral groups, academe and non-government organizations to join the council as full members or observers.

Section 6 of the EO states that: "The Council shall advise the President and Congress if and when the exercise of emergency presidential powers shall be required to address food and energy problems."

Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Sergio Apostol said while the Constitution mandates the President to seek the concurrence of Congress in exercising emergency powers in relation to national security, such as imposing martial law, it is silent when it comes to emergency powers on economic matters.

Article XII Section 17 of the Constitution, which deals on national economy and patri-mony, states that: "In times of national emergency, when the public interest so requires, the State may, during the emergency and under reasonable terms prescribed by it, temporarily take over or direct the operation of any privately-owned public utility or business affected with public interest."

"The President can unilaterally exercise her emergency powers in case there is a food or oil crisis but she works best on advice that's why she created this body that would advise her on any contingency or crisis," Apostol told *The STAR*.

He said lawmakers and sectoral groups were invited to the NFEC, adding the government must not quibble and should act quickly

once a crisis is imminent.

"It is better to be prepared for something instead of doing nothing," Apostol said.

In her speech at the Eulogio Amang Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST), Mrs. Arroyo said "a breakdown of the household expenditures of employees, public or private, shows that a sizable portion of a family's household income expense goes to rice and transport fares."

At EARIST, she launched a P2 billion educational assistance fund for public and private college students.

Mrs. Arroyo earlier pointed out that skyrocketing crude oil prices in the world market is beyond the government's control but stressed that the government is doing its best to

help the public cope with the increasing prices of commodities.

The President cited the various programs launched by her administration, including the P4 billion *Katas ng VAT* (value added tax) assistance to the poor that was launched recently.

The figure, which represents the first quarter VAT revenues of the government, includes the P2 billion subsidy for households consuming less than 100 kilowatt-hours of electricity a month and the P1 billion budget for the conversion of diesel-fed public utility vehicles to liquefied petroleum gas-compatible engines.