

# GMA calls for unity for RP to survive price surge

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo rallied Filipinos yesterday to unite in addressing the rising prices of food and oil in world markets that have hit the country hard.

In her Independence Day message at the Plaza San Luis

in Rizal Park, Mrs. Arroyo cited the exploits of the country's heroes that allowed the nation to survive difficult times and external challenges.

"Our heroes laid the founda-

tion for a new nation through their unity, sacrifice and common purpose," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"If we are to fill our hearts with the same fervor and love

for country, we will harvest the sweet fruits of freedom, justice and progress," the President said.

She added: "Towards this noble goal, I ask that we all

unite for the sake of our Motherland, for the sake of our families and for the sake of the future generations."

Mrs. Arroyo said the global economic downturn "was a

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heavy burden to the Philippines and we will invest in the people to allow us to see through these difficult times."

"We have much to do. Let us work so that we can fully achieve our reforms for the Philippines. We will fight for the economy, education, and the environment," Mrs. Arroyo said in Filipino.

The traditional Independence Day parade was cancelled this year, and Mrs. Arroyo said the budget for it would be used to directly benefit the poor.

"This year, we have no such dilemma but... in keeping with how we are trying to conserve our resources (in this) period of high world prices of oil and food, we have decided to dispense with the parade and use the budget instead to give direct service to the poor," she said.

Mrs. Arroyo noted that in last year's celebrations, there were some discussions on how long the parade should be. She said she saw on television a woman being interviewed complaining that she came all the way from Isabela and said the parade was too short.

She also said the country's strong economic fundamentals have enabled it to weather the spiraling food and oil prices even as the government continues to find ways to cushion the effects of runaway inflation on the poor and middle class.

Mrs. Arroyo assured the public the country has enough rice supply for the year and is geared towards self-sufficiency in five years.

"We have an adequate supply of rice today and we have a solid plan for self-sufficiency. This is important for our domestic and international audiences to appreciate," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She told a crowd gathered at the

Rizal Park that the country was only importing rice for its emergency reserves, adding, "there will be enough food for every Filipino."

She reiterated the government's efforts to alleviate the effects of rising prices, citing the lower tariffs on oil products and subsidies provided to the poor for electricity charges.

Mrs. Arroyo also said the country is moving to increase its use of "natural gas, geothermal, solar and wind energy," adding that the country was expanding its local oil production so that it could soon meet about 10 percent of local consumption.

Vice President Noli de Castro, for his part, led the Independence Day ceremonies at the shrine of Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo in Kawit, Cavite.

In his speech, De Castro criticized wealthy families in the country, or the so-called "oligarchs," for hampering progress in the campaign against poverty and protecting only their own interests, which widens social inequality.

De Castro said the oligarchs, who control big businesses in the country, could influence government policies to protect their interests.

Although the government tried to change the oligarchy structure in society, De Castro said this was not successful since it only led to cronyism.

De Castro emphasized good governance as he challenged big business to fulfill their duty to the country and for the private sector to be more transparent.

"If they want good governance, then they should also show good corporate governance," he said.

De Castro said transparency is a good solution to economic and corruption problems.

- With Pia Lee-Brago, AFP