

GMA allies buck audit of subsidies

By DELON PORCALLA

Lawmakers belonging to the administration coalition yesterday warned that the government may be courting a "perfect political storm" if it heeds the advice of a former national treasurer to audit the P12.5-billion fertilizer subsidies to farmers and P2-billion power rebates to consumers.

Professor Leonor Briones of the University of the Philippines, who served as national treasurer during the time of ousted President Joseph Estrada, had said the government should return the money once the Commission on Audit

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finds no legal basis for such subsidies.

"Do you mean to say that we are going to go house-to-house and demand the return of the P500 in rebates to lifeline power users? That will be the perfect recipe for a perfect storm," Marikina City Rep. Marcelino Teodoro said.

The neophyte lawmaker said the subsidies for the poor could have been spent on food already.

"Or if it has been used to buy notebooks, are we going to confiscate these from the kids as these are, by their reasoning, the fruits of an illegal act?"

Teodoro reiterated that the government's move to plow back revenues incurred from the continuous increases in oil prices - which in effect gives the government a windfall from VAT collections - "should be commended, not condemned."

"It should be spared from nit-picking. The poor need relief, not a lecture on government accounting and auditing rules," he said.

For his part, Aklan Rep. Florencio Miraflores said the fact that thousands of small power users are lining up in Land Bank of the Philippines' branches "is the best transparent proof that there are no irregularities in the distribution of refunds."

"The proof is out there. If COA would like to install an auditor in every line, then they are free to do so but it would show preposterousness of the idea to audit million of refund recipients," he said.

Miraflores said as to the legal basis of the refunds, budgetary laws give wide latitude to the Executive in granting expenditures "and I don't think that the executive branch would court legal suits if they are not sure about the legal basis of the refunds," he said.

Northern Samar Rep. Paul Daza said opposition senators and congressmen should not oppose the government's three-year P316-billion "Noah's Ark" subsidy program because this more than a hundred-year-old scheme has been adopted all over the world.

The administration congressman made known his sentiments upon learning that some senators and congressmen are opposing the Ahon Family program, even if this will directly benefit the country's poorest of the poor, by way of subsidies and cash dole-outs.

"It's better than procurement of goods and services. It's less susceptible to corruption. And it's easier to audit, the Commission on Audit can do it easily," he argued.

"You can't overprice cash. Cash is cash. It's a very good program, especially in these times of crisis. When indigents get it, they have more choices, they can buy whatever they want," he said.

The government's subsidy has "dual benefits," Daza pointed out, because it helps the poor cope with the rising cost of living and "encourages desirable positive behavior" because it requires proof that the recipients are sending their children to school.

Senators Loren Legarda and Manuel Roxas earlier questioned the subsidy program, doubting that this would help the poor cope with runaway prices of food and fuel.

House Minority Leader Ronaldo Zamora pointed out that this amount had not been included in the national budget, which simply means Mrs. Arroyo is not authorized to make such dole-outs without approval from Congress, which has the power of the purse.