

# GMA: Leaving for US a difficult decision

By MARVIN SY

"It was a difficult decision to go ahead with our trip, but we did so for several reasons," President Arroyo said yesterday as she defended her trip to the United States, which has been criticized because it came at a time when typhoon "Frank" devastated parts of the country.

Speaking at the commemoration of Philippine-Spanish Friendship Day in Baler, Aurora, the President said that typhoon Frank was on her mind

when she was preparing for her 10-day working visit to the US.

She said she made sure that before she left, all concerned agencies would be prepared to handle the effects of the typhoon.

"As President I have to make a choice. The US President and leaders of Congress specifically asked that we be at Washington at this time to advance pending Philippine

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legislation or the Veterans Equity Bill.”

Mrs. Arroyo explained that she also had job creation on her mind as she was expecting to secure some new business deals in the US.

She noted that her efforts to push for the passage of the veterans bill have been fruitful since the US Senate has already passed the bill, while the House of Representatives is close to passing its counterpart measure.

“It is the most problematic issue in 62 years. In the US House we are convinced, based on what congressional leaders have told us, that there is majority support for the Philippine veterans (bill),” the President said.

She added that her trip reaffirmed the strong ties between the Philippines and the US.

“In this trip, we were able to press for economic aid, food security, and stronger military cooperation,” she said.

Members of the opposition and the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines criticized Mrs.

Arroyo for pushing through with her trip to the US even as the country was being battered by Frank.

But Cabinet men said that the President was constantly on top of the situation even if she was not in the country, through her regular videoconferences with the National Disaster Coordinating Council.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza called on critics of the administration to “do more in helping than badmouthing.”

“At these trying times, there will be complaints and demands for immediate assistance which must be attended to. All hands on deck is the call of the day,” he said.

He said that the government also pays tribute to all of the faceless and unnamed people who risk life and limb and those unsung heroes still on the ground helping the victims of the calamity.

Dureza lauded former President Joseph Estrada for taking the initiative to go to Iloilo yesterday to distribute relief aid “without much fanfare.”