

GMA returns through NAIA-3



DRY RUN: President Arroyo watches her fellow passengers on Philippine Airlines flight PR 105 from San Francisco as they prepare to leave the NAIA-3 yesterday. Story on Page 2.

RUDY SANTOS

GMA arrives through NAIA-3 for dry run; Defensor says terminal to open in 3 weeks

President Arroyo yesterday arrived through the mothball Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 3 (NAIA-3) on her return from a US visit, and ordered it be made ready for commercial use in weeks.

The President went through NAIA-3 as part of a dry run and told Michael Defensor, the head of a task force on the terminal, to get it ready for use by domestic airlines within three weeks.

International flights will start from the terminal within six months, officials reportedly said.

Defensor said the government is confident that it can start operations of NAIA-3 even before all of its obligations for the facility have been settled.

Defensor, former presidential chief of

By MARVIN SY

staff, said that the issue of compensation for the developers of the terminal is no longer a problem as the government will definitely settle its obligations as stated by the Supreme Court.

"As of now the legal issues are already cleared because we already have a decision saying that we can have possession of the airport and to prepare the airport for its eventual opening," Defensor told reporters at the NAIA-3 yesterday.

"Given that mandate, we can already operate it domestically and internationally under a situation of trying to perfect the system, making it efficient and making it international by standards," he added.

Terminal 3 was scheduled to be in ser-

vice in late 2002 but has been unused after a bitter dispute between the government and the builders' consortium, headed by German airport operator Fraport.

The government seized the terminal, which has a capacity of 13 million passengers a year, in 2004. Fraport and the joint venture company for the project are pursuing compensation claims of over \$400 million.

After a series of dry runs conducted by airport authorities, the NAIA-3 accepted its first flight, Philippine Airlines PR 105, which carried the President, her delegation and other paying customers from San Francisco, at 2:30 a.m. yesterday.

Mrs. Arroyo stayed for several minutes inside the terminal to observe airport procedures for arriving passengers. She inspected customs, immigration and baggage facilities and told officials to make some improvements.

"This is not an official opening because we want to test the systems. There are many systems that need to be tested. For example, air conditioning, escalators, carousel... So the President wants to see how things are, she wants to have a feel if indeed in case the legal aspect is finished, we can open this at any time," Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said.

Timetable

Defensor has set a timetable for the Terminal 3 opening.

For initial domestic operations, he said that the facility could be opened in about three weeks.

Defensor pointed out that PAL, with its budget airline PAL Express, along with Air Philippines and Cebu Pacific, have all expressed interest in using NAIA-3.

He said that he has met with the officials of the three airlines and there was an agreement that the long-term direction of the entire airport operation should first be determined before it goes "full blast."

Initially, the participation of airlines for NAIA-3's domestic operation would be very minimal.

All stakeholders would have to determine first which airline would use which facility since the NAIA Terminal 2 would still be operational.

At present, Terminal 2 is used exclusively by PAL for both its domestic and international flights.

"(But) once we get the direction, for example if PAL decides that we will locate here (NAIA-3), then we go full blast," Defensor said.

But Defensor stressed that "based on some legal impediments, meaning we cannot practice ownership, we have to be very, very careful legally." Defensor revealed that he has received feelers from the Philippine International Air Terminals Co., the local consortium that won the bidding for the development of NAIA-3, for possible compromise on the settlement of obligations by the government.

"I don't know if these are official feelers or not though, but as I've said, I have no problems with a compromise," Defensor said.

According to Defensor, it is just a matter of coming up with a mutually acceptable and transparent process of validating the total cost.

When the government pushes through with the operation of NAIA-3 for domestic flights, Defensor said it would be possible to set up concessionaires within the facility as long as the government is not engaged in any "acts of ownership."

He said that the court did not give a clear explanation of what constitutes an act of ownership.

"The court didn't define it. But I would rather be on the safe side, meaning we're not going to act as owner saying this is a contract for this or a contract for that. As of now we have not violated anything, any order of the court. And we do not plan to violate any order of the court," he said.

The other terminals at Manila's decaying airport, which is near the sea and in the heart of the city, have a combined capacity of about 17-18 million passengers a year.

The government is also promoting the international airport at Clark, but it is mainly used by budget airlines and cargo flights.

'Very, very productive GMA trip'

Meanwhile, following her arrival through NAIA-3, the President was already at Clark Freeport in Pampanga at noon where she met with provincial governors and officials of the Regional Disaster Coordinating Council in the aftermath of typhoon "Frank."

Presidential deputy spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo, who joined the President on her visit to the US, described it as "very, very productive," noting that she met with seven business groups in New York.

Fajardo said the trip could yield potential investments worth \$516 million and provide jobs for at least 15,700 workers.

She cited the expansion plans of Texas Instruments, which already has a \$1-billion facility at Clark Freeport.

- With Reuters, Ding Cervantes