

Senators to GMA: Guide us in crisis

By AUREA CALICA

Senators are calling on President Arroyo to provide the necessary direction for Congress to address the food and fuel crises in the country.

The lawmakers, led by Senate President Manuel Villar Jr., said they would be ready to cooperate with the executive and help out through legislation.

Villar said the Senate is ready to tackle all proposals that would serve as an alternative to the value-added tax (VAT).

Lawmakers and various sectors have been calling for the reduction, suspension or scrapping of the 12 percent VAT on petroleum products. They argue that the tax being levied on oil imports contributes heavily to the high prices of fuel, which push up the prices of basic commodities.

Lawmakers said the subsidies from VAT revenues being given to the people are not enough to help them cope with the increasing prices of basic goods.

Malacañang says scrapping the oil VAT would paralyze government operations and adversely affect the delivery of basic services.

"If we are going to remove VAT, we have to determine the proper replacement so government revenues will not be severely affected," Villar said.

He said it would also not be wise to scrap VAT altogether without enacting legislation that would give the government at least half of what it was getting from the oil VAT.

Turn to Page 8

Senators to GMA From Page 1

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Sen. Loren Legarda, for her part, said it would help if climate change would be included in the SONA along with the government's contingency plan for natural calamities.

She said the disasters and calamities that struck the nation in the last few months should serve as a wake-up call for the administration to pay close attention to climate change.

Legarda said strategies must be clearly defined to adapt to climate change impacts on food security, environment and water resources.

Roxas, for his part, said the people deserve a better SONA from the President.

"We don't need another litany of achievements and new promises... We (must) move in on concrete solutions to alleviate the increasing pains of the needy," he said.

According to Roxas, many people are inclined to dismiss the upcoming SONA "as a self-serving political show."

"What they want to hear and see is an honest statement on the situation, an honest-to-goodness inventory of our resources and capabilities, and a clear road out of the deepening crisis," he said.

Roxas said Mrs. Arroyo should spell out in her SONA the details on how to achieve greater productivity for the poor rather than focus on providing dole-out programs.

Revilla, on the other hand, also said the SONA must state the solutions to the present economic crisis.

He said it would be proper for Malacañang to lay down its plans to address the increasing costs of basic commodities.

"What we need are concrete programs. I am optimistic that the SONA will be full of specific answers, not cloudy proposals. It will determine the country's direction," Revilla said.

Revilla said the socio-economic programs for the medium- and long-terms had already been articulated in the previous SONAs and "what the people want to hear right now are answers to everyday problems, which are expected to worsen before it gets better."

Revilla said he would want to hear a substantial portion of the SONA devoted to the government's programs on alternative sources of fuel.

Focus on the crisis

Malacañang said President Arroyo will deliver "a no-frills" SONA on Monday that would take a hard look at the country's economy.

The President will unveil a massive social welfare program to help Filipinos weather the effects of the global food and fuel crises, Presidential Management Staff chief Secretary Cerge Remonde said.

"It (SONA) will be straightforward and the President will confront the situation and will lay out plans on how she intends to address the crisis," Remonde said.

"There will be no denying that we have problems as the entire world is confronting this matter," he said.

Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo would just state the national welfare programs without the "rhetorical flourishes" which she will unveil on Monday as a "very well crafted, very well consolidated plan."

The President's economic adviser, Albay Rep. Joey Salceda, said the "single biggest achievement of President Arroyo is in rebuilding the state capacity for affirmative intervention either to reduce poverty, enhance competitiveness, correct structural imbalances and confront external shocks."

He said the debt-to-Gross Domestic Product ratio falling to 51 percent from 78 percent and the Consolidated Public Sector Deficit of P310 billion reversed to a surplus of P67 billion provide adequate long term resources "to do good and to do well."

"(It Arroyo administration) did

this by growing the GDP, taxing the middle class and paying down debt," Salceda said.

But the biggest challenge facing the administration, according to Salceda, is using that capacity to reduce poverty.

Salceda said the recent increase in poverty was due to the inability of the bureaucracy to spend either for big-ticket infrastructure for growth or for mass programs for the poor.

There is also the "historical incapacity to tax the rich instead of the middle-class" and controlling the population growth, which is higher among the poor, Salceda said.

Presidential Adviser on Political Affairs and Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno said Mrs. Arroyo would also compare the country to its neighbors in Southeast Asia and East Asia in dealing with world crisis.

Puno expressed "hope our people will listen to everything that she says which is all verifiable and I think a clear and honest description of the response that the government is taking to all of these challenges that face us."

Puno added Mrs. Arroyo is expected to tackle not only the world crisis but also what the government is doing to address the issues on the local front.

Puno though admitted the country faces more challenges that were not anticipated and mentioned in the SONA last year.

"From a year ago the challenges that faced our country have changed, we did not see the (increase in the) prices of oil and rice," Puno said.

"So the problems that are faced by our country are different. I think we will see that in spite of all of these crises the government has been able to respond very proactively to all of these problems."

Remonde, on the other hand, said it was unfortunate that critics are hitting the SONA when it has not been delivered yet.

He said the President is expected to give assurances that there will be no new taxes but she will also reiterate the reasons why the value-added tax (VAT) should not be scrapped

despite a strong clamor from various sectors.

She will also restate her position on the issue of population management in supporting the stand of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines against legislated family planning methods.

Remonde said the President would make no mention of amending the Constitution in her SONA.

He said Mrs. Arroyo would also seek congressional funding for rehabilitation programs for areas hit by the recent typhoon.

Usual rhetoric

Critics, however, are expecting that Mrs. Arroyo will deliver the usual rhetoric on her SONA and declared they will "set her on fire" again on Monday.

Militant groups led by Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) said they are working to put up the big-gest effigy of Mrs. Arroyo and set it on fire during the SONA.

Renato Reyes of Bayan said they are working to complete a 21-foot tall effigy that will feature the hull of a sinking ship and Mrs. Arroyo flying away on board a plane.

This is to depict the Arroyo administration as "a sinking vessel with the captain of the ship even robbing the passengers," Reyes said.

In what could be a preview of the planned massive anti-SONA protest, militants held separate rallies in Manila to show the real state of the working class in the country.

Protesters from the Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) gathered yesterday at the Welcome Kotonda to dramatize their protest over the worsening plight of Filipino workers, particularly the minimum wage earners.

APL official Edwin Bustillos said there had been no improvement in the lives of Filipino workers since Mrs. Arroyo assumed the presidency.

Bustillos said the government has been implementing repressive policies against workers.

"The government has been consistently violating our right to development. This is one of the many crimes that this government has committed

ted," Bustillos added.

Security forces, on the other hand, are gearing up in anticipation of a showdown with rallyists on Monday where Mrs. Arroyo is expected to deliver her SONA at the opening of session of Congress.

The Philippine National Police (PNP) said security preparations had been made for the SONA with about 6,200 policemen, military and traffic enforcers deployed to secure the 16-hectare Batasang Pambansa complex and surrounding areas.

PNP chief for operations Director Silverio Alarcio said a full alert would be implemented starting tomorrow, with additional deployment of policemen from the Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog provinces to complement the security around Batasan.

National Capital Region Police Office (NCRPO) chief Director Geary Barias said the policemen to be deployed around Batasan had been briefed by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) to observe maximum tolerance in dealing with the rallyists.

"We're very optimistic that the SONA will turn out to be a peaceful one. We will allow the protesters to express their sentiments within the bounds of law. We have to balance the freedom of expression and that of law and order," Barias said.

Barias though revealed they have received intelligence reports of a communist hit squad infiltrating the ranks of the rallyists. But he gave assurances that every security detail has not been overlooked and has been properly implemented.

Barias estimated the protesters will swell up to 7,000 in number but the rallies would be confined.

"We are almost 100 percent ready at this time. The traffic rerouting scheme will be out tomorrow (July 26) and it will take effect at 9 a.m. of July 28," he said.

Barias said policemen will be present in the area as early as 4 a.m. on Monday. - With Paolo Romero, Christina Mendez, Delon Porcalla, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Katherine Adraneda, Mayen Jaymalin, Reinir Padua

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