

Palace: GMA wants Cha-cha for peace

Dureza: Mindanao federalism needs Cha-cha

By PAOLO ROMERO and CHRISTINA MENDEZ

President Arroyo may have confirmed one of the worst fears of her critics - that she is determined to change the Constitution - with her declaration yesterday that she wanted federalism.

In her speech during a luncheon tendered in honor of visiting Switzerland President Pascal Couchepin in Malacañang, Mrs. Arroyo thanked the Swiss government for its willingness to share its experience on federalism.

"We thank the Swiss government not only for the values of freedom and civil rights that are enshrined in its culture but also for its willingness to share its experience in federalism through the Institute of Federalism located in Freebord in Switzerland, which has been helping us do our studies on this form of government."

"We advocate federalism as a way to ensure long-lasting peace in Mindanao," she said.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza said the President's statement implied that she was pushing for Charter change, which is the way to implement a federal system.

But he dismissed speculation that it could lead to extending her stay in power beyond 2010. He pointed out that Mrs. Arroyo has repeatedly stated that she is stepping down when her term ends.

"This may sound new but she has announced this a long time ago, that

was said in a news briefing.

He said federalism should not only be for Mindanao but should be for the "whole country to avail of reforms of federalism."

He said federalism would allow local governments to have more authority and flexibility in governance, particularly in delivering basic services.

The declaration came as violence erupted in North Cotabato after government troops tried to flush out Muslim rebels who took over some towns in the province following the aborted signing in Malaysia of the

Palace: GMA wants

From Page 1

Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order stopping the signing of the MOA last week.

Meanwhile, peace adviser Hermogenes Esporon Jr also drew flak from senators for declaring last weekend that Charter change is needed for a lasting peace in Mindanao.

Senators slammed Esporon for his remarks saying Charter change should happen during Mrs. Arroyo's term while accusing government of using the peace process as an excuse to change the Constitution during the term of Mrs. Arroyo.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr advised Esporon to abandon Charter change because he is "not qualified."

Esperon should just provide recommendations on how to solve extra-judicial killings, which were prevalent during his term as Armed Forces' chief of staff, Pimentel said.

"Esperon should stay away from discussions on

political structures. He's not qualified. Let's just ask him about the extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances, maybe he can help. But about the peace process, I'm very sorry to say that he's not qualified," Pimentel said in Filipino.

Davao also admitted during a Senate hearing last week that there is a need to amend the Constitution to make it suit the MOA-AD.

Senate Majority Leader Francis Pangilinan and Sen. Loren Legarda urged the government not to use the peace process as an excuse to extend Mrs. Arroyo's term.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II said Esporon's statements revealed the administrator's real agenda is pushing for the MOA.

"I hope nobody uses the MILF-MOA issue to advance something that has long been ignored by the people," Legarda said in Filipino.

"The mere mention of Cha-cha raises public suspicion that politicians and the government are up to something," she added.

Legarda believes that any move to change the Constitution will face rough sailing at

the Senate.

"I don't think any person can demand that Congress prioritize Cha-cha to be able to have peace in Mindanao," she pointed out.

Sen. Francis Escudero noted that the MOA-AD was a "poorly negotiated" agreement, like the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement or JPEPA.

Sen. John Arroyo and Escudero even sarcastically brought up the issue before the floor that lawyer-Cesaril Montesa, Liberal Party director general, was one of the conferees of the MOA. One of the opponents of the MOA, Senator Roxas, is the LP president.

The Senate Committee on Constitutional Amendments and Revision of Codes and Laws, and on Peace, Reconciliation, and Sensitization, will tackle the resolution questioning the legality of the MOA.

In a statement, Pangilinan also scolded Esporon for declaring that Charter change will happen within Arroyo's term.

"Esperon's statement on Cha-cha and the highly suspect moves of government negotiators only expose how out of touch with reality our gov-

ernment is when it comes to the fate of this controversial peace pact," Pangilinan said.

"If they think that the people will readily swallow the garbage they will serve them they are wrong. Ignoring the sentiments of our citizens in the said peace pact will be the very reason this endeavor will not prosper," Pangilinan warned.

"We already saw what can happen when we railroad Cha-cha. The people are vigilant, and they will not take a matter this serious sitting down," Pangilinan said. "If government is really sincere in bringing peace all over the Philippines, then it must not put first selfish interests before the welfare of this nation," he said.

New commission for Muslims

A House-initiated measure that is now under Senate scrutiny seeks the creation of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos to replace the Office of Muslim Affairs, Speaker Prospero Nograles said yesterday.

House Bill 4253 or an "Act Creating the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos" will supplement government efforts for the "complete inte-

gration of Muslim Filipinos into the mainstream development."

"Muslim Filipinos, our brothers, have the right to plot their destiny within the framework of the Philippine Constitution," Nograles said, adding the measure will ensure that Muslim Filipinos "are not denied their rightful share of the fruits of national development."

"It is our constitutional duty to ensure the rights and well being of our Muslim brothers," Nograles said.

Under HB 4253, the proposed commission will absorb the duties and functions of the existing OMA and will remain under the Office of the President.

The measure was sponsored in plenary, jointly by the House committee on Muslim affairs, government reorganization, and appropriations headed by Reps. Pangilinan Balindang, Eric Basilio Fabian and Edcel Lagman, respectively.

Among the signatories, apart from Nograles, are Deputy Speaker Simon Datumanong and Reps. Judy Syjaco, Rufus Rodriguez, Balindang, Rolito Golea, Lagman, Mujir Hatawan, Date Pas Mangudadatu, Fabian, and

Ernesto Pardo.

Syjaco and Rodriguez, although non-Muslims, said the bill stresses the importance of Muslim Filipinos in nation-building with due regard to their beliefs, customs, traditions, institutions and aspirations.

Datumanong, who represents Maguindanao, said that the commission should make Muslim Filipinos, and other indigenous groups, "active participants in national development."

A statement released by Nograles' office said the proposed commission "must establish the criteria for allocating additional resources for education, economic and cultural development programs."

"It also has the function of advising the President in the formulation, coordination, implementation and monitoring of policies, plans, programs and projects affecting Muslim Filipino communities," the statement added.

"It would also act as the primary government agency through which Muslim Filipinos can seek government assistance and redress, and serve as medium through which such assistance may be extended to Muslim Filipinos." - With Delon Posada