

GMA flies to NY for UN meet

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo left last night for New York to address the 63rd United Nations General Assembly regarding the status of the Philippines in efforts to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Malacañang announced yesterday.

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Press Secretary Jesus Dureza described Mrs. Arroyo's five-day visit to New York as a very brief and hectic one amid criticisms that her trip was unnecessary due to pressing security concerns in Mindanao and the economic problems in the country.

She boarded a chartered Philippine Airlines flight from the Manila Centennial Terminal at around 10:30 p.m. with Cabinet officials and some lawmakers.

Dureza said Mrs. Arroyo would be the fourth world leader to address the general assembly, which will start with the speech of US President George W. Bush.

She will speak on the country's work to address issues of poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, among others under the UN MDG.

"We have substantial improvements in achieving the MDG and this is what the President will point out in her address," Dureza said.

He said Mrs. Arroyo would also meet with some leaders of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), a group of 57 Islamic countries, to discuss developments in Mindanao.

Dureza said it was the OIC that brokered the 1996 peace agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front. Her meeting would be with OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and other leaders during which she would also thank the group for its support for the peace process in Mindanao.

She will also explain to the OIC leaders her radical policy on the peace process where the government shifted its focus from dialogue with armed groups to consultations with communities and other stakeholders.

The new policy will also require that any negotiations with rebel groups immediately include the issue of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR).

The President will also meet in New York with some leaders of the international financial and banking community to discuss the current global economic crunch hitting both rich and poor countries.

"There is going to be a dialogue or briefing from high level banking and financial officials," Dureza said. "We all know that financial markets in the US are going down and whether we like it or not, we are affected although how severe it would be is not yet

known."

He said Mrs. Arroyo would also be in a position to fully appreciate the discussion since she is also an economist.

Also expected to join the meeting are Trade Secretary Peter Favila, Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Ralph Recto, Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo and Dureza.

Favila told The STAR that Mrs. Arroyo is expected to meet with Citibank officials chairman William Rhodes and senior counselor Robert Rubin.

He said the President is also scheduled to hold talks with World Bank president Robert Zoellick.

Arrangements are also being made for a meeting between Mrs. Arroyo and officials of the New York Federal Reserve, Favila said.

Mrs. Arroyo last week vowed to strengthen the country's banking system and improve its fiscal position as well as promote the promising local growth sectors amid fears of a global recession.

"We Filipinos are fighters, naturally optimistic and we don't give up. We are optimistic that as our celebrations for Christmas and New Year draw nearer, the economic clouds will begin to lighten," Mrs. Arroyo said during an economic briefing in Manila.

She assured the people that the country has a clear and realistic plan and will stay the course with determination and compassion.

Recto said strategies to boost growth should be pushed in light of the current global slowdown and increased food and fuel prices.

The strategies should include "improving capacity of government agencies in using their budgets, encouraging diversification, innovation and upgrading exports, continuing strong support for agriculture and attracting more investments from countries like China and the Middle East," he said.

"In order to meet the economic growth targets, the following are some of our key strategies. First is to increase the absorptive capacity of government agencies. We are directing the infrastructure agencies to prepare their engineering plans now for projects in the proposed 2009 budget," he said.

He pointed out that China has a \$1.7 trillion surplus and is a close neighbor while the oil-producing countries are experiencing a boom that the country could take advantage of by attracting investments.