

# Bolante clears GMA

*'No anomaly  
in disbursement'*

By AUREA CALICA

Looking meek and calm, former agriculture undersecretary Jocelyn "Jocjoc" Bolante appeared at the Senate yesterday and admitted distributing P728 million to 159 local government officials before the 2004 national elections but denied any irregularity and cleared President Arroyo of any role in the release of the funds.

Bolante also confirmed he had a list of those who received funds, most of whom turned out to be allies of Mrs. Arroyo.

But he stressed he had nothing to do with the distribution of liquid fertilizers, saying the money he disbursed was for farm inputs and implements. He said 22 of the 181 in his original list did not receive the allotment.

"President Arroyo was not involved in this particular project of the Department of Agriculture. The implementation of the P728-million farm input-farm implement program was approved by DBM (Department of Budget and Management) without the approval of President Arroyo," Bolante told the senators.

"I was not the one who gave out and procured the fertilizers. I did not implement the program. I only downloaded the money from the central office to the regional field units," Bolante said.

"It could be the undersecretary of operations or regional directors who have direct supervision and authority over the implementation of the program," he pointed out.

Confronted by one senator after another, the



Former agriculture undersecretary Jocelyn 'Jocjoc' Bolante swears to tell the truth before the start of a Senate hearing on the fertilizer fund scam yesterday.

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former agriculture official insisted there was no anomaly in the disbursement of the funds.

His version of the story: Mrs. Arroyo did not have to approve the release of the money as it was part of the Department of Agriculture's budget and that it was not a unique DA program for 2004.

Bolante said the funds were allotted as early as Sept. 4, 2003 but that the bulk amount was spent after the May 2004 elections.

Bolante claimed there were no indications of irregularity before he resigned on Aug. 1, 2004 and he denied receiving commissions in the course of disbursing the funds.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II, who asked about Mrs. Arroyo's alleged involvement in the anomaly, expressed his disbelief at hearing Bolante's answer, saying it was impossible for the President not to know about such a huge disbursement.

The senators said they found it incredible that an undersecretary would be able to have such a huge amount released on his own.

Sen. Loren Legarda said Bolante was "very powerful" to have made the release of the funds possible, while Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile asked him to explain why, as a mere undersecretary, he was permitted to disburse such funds when the signature of the department secretary was needed for transactions in-

volving more than P5 million.

Bolante said it was an exceptional situation and that he had an authority to handle such a transaction because then Agriculture Secretary Luis Lorenzo was traveling all the time.

Senators Francis Escudero and Blue Ribbon committee chairman Alan Peter Cayetano accused Bolante of trying to pass the buck to other DA officials.

Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago confronted Bolante about a witness, Jose Barredo Jr., who testified that he had served as runner for the former agriculture undersecretary and that money was really handed to local officials.

Barredo claimed Bolante received 25 percent commission while congressmen, governors and mayors got 30 percent. The supplier and the runner were each given 20 percent. Santiago said the whole amount, therefore, was shared among the alleged perpetrators, leaving nothing for the farmers.

She also questioned why only one supplier, Feshan Philippines Inc., was awarded the contract to provide the fertilizers nationwide.

Santiago further noted that P2.8 billion was actually allotted for farm inputs and farm implements.

She said that of the P728-million, Bolante could have earned P182 million in commission.

"I would like to categorically say that I don't know that Jose Barredo. I haven't met him," Bolante said in response.

Bolante added that 91 percent of the funds had been liquidated as shown by Commission on Audit records.

"Each project is independent of the other, in other words if there were 181 proponents there should have been 181 procurements," Bolante said.

### Malacañang elated

Malacañang welcomed Bolante's Senate testimony clearing Mrs. Arroyo, saying it's only the political opposition which was trying to besmirch the administration.

"We welcome the clarification made during the hearing that President Arroyo had no hand in the controversy by way of approval of fund releases or implementation of the fertilizer program," presidential adviser on political affairs Gabriel Claudio said.

"We hope that the investigation will proceed and end with the rights, duties and privileges of both the Senate and Mr. Bolante and other witnesses being consistently honored and respected," he added.

"But let's wait for this investigation to end. We're hoping that after this all the facts will be straightened out," deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said.

She also defended Bolan-

te's appointment to the DA, saying it was based on his qualifications and not on his being a friend of First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo.

### 'Not a single centavo'

Members of the House of Representatives did not ask for fertilizer or fertilizer funds from Bolante in 2004, Speaker Prospero Nograles said yesterday.

"Congressmen never received a single cent from this project. They received finished products. They took no part in the purchase or implementation of the project. They did not ask for it," he said.

He said based on Bolante's Senate testimony, only three of his colleagues requested for fertilizer funds - Representatives Eduardo Zialcita of Parañaque and Nanette Daza of Quezon City, and former congressman Federico Sandoval II of Malabon-Navotas.

"I do not know who are the proponents he is talking about," he said. Zialcita, in a statement, denied having received fertilizer funds.

Nograles is among the 105 House members in Bolante's list of fertilizer fund "proponents."

Earlier, the Speaker, who represents Davao City's first district, said his district office received not cash but liquid fertilizer from the DA regional office and not from Bolante.

"Fertilizers were a surprise to us. Suddenly they were available at the DA regional office," he said.

Nograles gave credence to Bolante's assertion that the President had no part in the release of the P728-million in fertilizer funds to the former agriculture undersecretary.

"President Arroyo had absolutely no part because the funds were part and parcel of the agriculture budget as approved by Congress. Their release needed approval from her," he said.

Rep. Satur Ocampo of the party-list group Bayan Muna

disagreed with Nograles.

"He offered to own the responsibility for the scam. Yet, Sen. Mar Roxas was right to point out that Bolante was lying because Mrs. Arroyo has been micro managing her government," he said.

He said the President directly handles even the details of a project, "particularly on matters of political import to her, like the fertilizer fund distribution before the 2004 election." - With Jess Diaz and Marvin Sy