



Syria's President Bashar al-Assad welcomes President Arroyo in Damascus last May 4. Mrs. Arroyo is back in Manila after a three-day official visit to the Middle East. Story on Page 3.

REUTERS

GMA arrives today with Egypt, Syria backing on OIC status

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo is scheduled to arrive before dawn today from a five-day trip to Egypt and Syria where she was able to obtain the support of the two countries for the Philippines' bid for observer status in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and secure potential investments worth over \$1 billion.

Mrs. Arroyo is expected to arrive at 4:30 a.m. at the Centennial Terminal 2 along with her official delegation.

Her first stop was Marsa Alam in Egypt where she met Kuwaiti billionaire Nasser Al-Kharafi, who expressed interest in putting up a \$1.2-billion aviation facility in the Clark Freeport.

She then proceeded to Cairo where she held bilateral talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who not only expressed support for the Philippines' bid for observer status but also committed to urge other OIC member-states to back the country's effort.

The Al Kholi Group of companies in Saudi Arabia and the Philippine Postal Corporation (Philpost) are also exploring prospects for a joint venture to modernize the country's postal services, according to Philpost chief executive officer Hector Villanueva, a member of the delegation to Cairo.

Mrs. Arroyo met with Dr. Hamza Al Kholi, an Egyptian who conducts his business in Saudi Arabia.

She proceeded to Damascus, Syria upon the invitation of the Syrian government. She met with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and was also able to secure his commitment for the country's bid for an observer seat in the OIC.

Mrs. Arroyo also addressed the Syrian People's Assembly

during her state visit to Damascus.

Syria and the Philippines also signed three agreements that are expected to further strengthen and elevate to a higher level the bilateral relations between the two countries in various fronts.

The signing took place at the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs building between Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo and his Syrian counterpart, Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallem, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said in a statement yesterday.

Remonde, who accompanied Mrs. Arroyo, said the agreements were on the establishment of bilateral consultations, cultural cooperation, and visa exemption for nationals of the countries holding official and diplomatic passports.

Remonde said the two leaders also agreed to immediately organize a Syrian-Filipino Business Council.

No exemption

Meanwhile, the President is not exempt from thermal scanning at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAA) as the Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) continues its efforts to prevent the entry of the influenza A(H1N1) virus into the country.

"We are doing this for the good of our countrymen and tourists alike. Times like these require drastic measures which we are sure the public would clearly understand, as it is a worldwide concern," said MIAA General Manager Alfonso Cusi.

Mrs. Arroyo will be required to submit herself to thermal scanning when she arrives at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday on board Philippine Airlines PR-001 from Egypt.

- With Rudy Santos