

GMA names Pacquiao ambassador for peace

Pacman now an intel agent

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo has named Filipino boxing champion Manny Pacquiao as the country's "Ambassador for Peace and Understanding" in an elaborate homecoming ceremony at Malacañang yesterday.

The homegrown boxing hero was also tapped by the government as a "glorified asset" in its intelligence affairs and designated him as special assistant to Secretary of Justice Raul Gonzalez.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands lined the streets of the metropolis to welcome the boxing superstar who had earlier defied a government request to stay in the US over fears of the dreaded A(H1N1) influenza virus.

Mrs. Arroyo announced Pacquiao's designation during the reception at the Rizal Hall where she also "interviewed" the boxer on his fight against Ricky Hatton.

Pacquiao arrived at the Palace grounds at 10:45 a.m. in a motorcade and was met by Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita.

He was then escorted to the Music Room where he was received by Mrs. Arroyo and First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo. The Filipino boxing champion gave the First Couple blue jackets from Team Pacquiao.

Also present in the room were Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, Education Secretary Jesli Lapus, Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez, Environment Secretary Lito Atienza, and Metropolitan Manila

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President Arroyo presents a cake adorned with a championship belt to boxing idol Manny Pacquiao during a luncheon hosted by the Palace yesterday. Looking on is the President's granddaughter Evie.

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Development Authority chairman Bayani Fernando.

Pacquiao was also presented by Palace chefs with a 28-pound chocolate cake that had a candy replica of his belt as decoration.

After several minutes, Mrs. Arroyo, Pacquiao and his entourage proceeded to the Rizal Hall for a brief program that was followed by a luncheon.

Ermita read the proclamation declaring a National Day of Celebration for Pacquiao's victory.

Three classical singers rendered two songs for Pacquiao, including his own song "Para Sa 'Yo (For You)."

During the program, Mrs. Arroyo interviewed Pacquiao, who said that he thought Hatton was "bigger and stronger" as the latter's trainer claimed before the fight.

"But it turned out that he can't beat the fist of the Filipino people. I felt a little pity for Hatton, especially after I watched the DVD, the replay.

I felt some pity because he was a good man but his trainer talked too much," he said in Filipino.

Pacquiao said he invited his mother Dionisia to watch the fight near the ring but she refused, as she might not be able to bear the tension and excitement.

He said he was proud that Hollywood stars like Denzel Washington and Mark Wahlberg took pictures with him because they "believed in the talents of the Filipino."

Special designation

Under department order no. 344 signed by Gonzalez, Pacquiao was tasked to coordinate with the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and provide intelligence reports "in the interest of public service and pursuant to the provisions of existing laws."

Gonzalez told reporters last night that the boxing champion would not receive a salary from the government. He said

Pacquiao was given an official designation in government simply because "he deserves it."

"He said he wanted to help the government in whatever way he could. He was asking for it (a designation) and it wasn't hard for us to give it anyway," he stressed.

The Justice chief said he has known Pacquiao for a long time and personally knows that the latter would be able to help government because of his access to information that may be crucial to some cases being handled by the DOJ.

"He is popular and has many friends. There are many people who approach him and it's easy for him to gather important information. He is a very useful person," he explained.

Gonzalez also said that the boxing champion could be a big help to programs and campaigns of the Justice department because he is well respected in Visayas and Mind-

anao.

Pacquiao, however, was not given any specific assignment.

Gonzalez recalled that he already was considering giving the popular boxing champion the honorary directorship of his department's action center.

Rousing welcome

Pacquiao's hectic schedule started in the morning at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources as guest of honor at the department's flag raising ceremony.

He was received by Atienza and greeted by cheering officials, employees and thousands of fans and supporters.

"We honor Manny. One of our country's most important human resources, as he continues to inspire all of us that Filipinos have what it takes to be world champions," said Atienza, who the Filipino champion considers his "second father."

It has been a tradition for Pacquiao, an environmentalist who founded Task Force Ligtas Kinaiyahan - a reforestation campaign - to visit Atien-

za's office for a courtesy call.

The rousing welcome was immediately followed by a grand motorcade where thousands lined up the designated route to welcome back their hero.

But many Manilaños were

disappointed because the motorcade went by too fast.

Unlike in the past, Pacquiao's entourage did not pass by the Manila City Hall and missed many streets. - Edu Punay, Sandy Araneta, AFP



President Arroyo presents Manny Pacquiao with a presidential proclamation declaring yesterday a National Day of Celebration in honor of the boxing icon in Malacañang.

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