

GMA off to Korea today

By MARVIN SY

Neither the threat of an attack by North Korea nor the spread of the Influenza A(H1N1) virus could stop President Arroyo from leaving today for a visit to South Korea.

Deputy presidential spokesman Anthony Golez said that the President would leave just before noon for her two-day official visit to Seoul. An official visit means that Filipino taxpayers are shouldering the expenses for the trip.

Malacañang previously stated that the Department of Foreign Affairs and the President's security advisers had studied the implications of North Korea's recent nuclear and missile tests and determined that the President should push through with the trip.

Deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said that the President will promote bilateral interests and participate in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit.

"We have a working relationship with the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) despite our differences. We have always been committed to global

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nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament efforts," she added.

Fajardo noted that the Philippine government supports the United Nations Security Council resolutions on the matter and "urges DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program and honor its commitments to the Six-Party talks."

North Korea recently announced that it had successfully conducted an underground nuclear weapons test, which South Korean officials claimed was felt on their side.

The Philippines and the Republic of Korea will sign 10 agreements on trade, energy and labor during the official visit, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said yesterday.

The DFA said there will be five government-to-government agreements to be signed after the bilateral meeting between Mrs. Arroyo and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak at the Blue House.

The agreements to be signed are the Memorandum of Understanding for Employment Permit System (EPS), MOU on Labor and Manpower Development Cooperation, Notes on the Grant Aid for Rice Processing Complexes (RPCs), MOU on the Feasibility Study on the Multi-Industry Cluster (MIC) Program, and MOU on Agricultural Scientific and Technical Cooperation.

Labor Secretary Mariano Roque and ROK Minister for Labor Lee Young Hee will sign the MOUs on EPS and Labor and Manpower Development Cooperation.

The EPS deal is a labor arrangement allowing skilled Filipino workers to avail of job opportunities in South Korea and renews the expired 2006 arrangement. The second MOU is an institutional cooperation arrangement.

Aside from these agreements, five other government-to-private deals will also be signed.

These include the MOU on Information Exchange and Cooperation between the Philippine International Sisterhood and Twinning Association and the Korea Local Authorities Foundation for International Relations, MOU on Cooperation and Friendship between Benguet province and Chungcheungbukdo province, MOU

between the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and Korea Trade and Investment Promotion Agency on institutional cooperation, and the Project Agreement between the DENR and the Korea Energy Economics Institute.

President Arroyo's visit to Seoul would be followed by her attendance to the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit on Jeju Island in South Korea on June 1 and 2.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde previously noted that the Commemorative Summit would affirm the two countries' collaboration with the rest of the region and the international community in the face of global economic and security challenges.

Remonde said the two presidents would take up the Chiang Mai Initiative as a matter of mutual interest between the Philippines and South Korea.

The Chiang Mai Initiative involves the establishment of a standby fund worth \$120 billion coming from the 10-member ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea.

It was envisioned by the countries concerned that the fund would provide the necessary support to any of the 13 nations in case they run into financial trouble.

China and Japan would provide the bulk of the fund at 32 percent each while South Korea would chip in 16 percent.

The balance of 20 percent would come from members of the ASEAN.

From Korea, Mrs. Arroyo will proceed to St. Petersburg in Russia for the International Economic Forum from June 4 to 6.

The President is part of the panel, which includes Russian Federation President Dmitry Medvedev, Japan's former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

The President would be part of the forum on "Global Economic Crisis: First Lessons and Leading the Way Forward."

Fajardo said that Mrs. Arroyo would have a bilateral meeting with Medvedev during her visit.

The President was also supposed to visit Lithuania but according to Fajardo, this was no longer on the itinerary.

— With Pia Lee-Brago