

# Senators slam GMA's 'pachydermal hide'

By AUREA CALICA

Senators branded yesterday President Arroyo and her allies as shameless and "elephant-skinned" for shrugging off criticism of her frequent foreign trips and saying the

President would not slow down on her travels.

"A pachydermal hide insulates President Arroyo from shame or criticism," Senate

Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr. said.

"Malacanang's decision to ignore public opinion against (Mrs. Arroyo's) frequent trips

is no longer surprising because she has become unfeeling of the criticisms against her abuses and anomalies," Sen. Panfilo Lacson said.

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Lacson and Sen. Francis Escudero said Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita should be grilled along with the officials of the Department of Budget and Management as regards the trips of the President.

Lacson said they would present the expenses of the President in her travels each year, where in some cases, the amounts she used were double the budget allocated for her trips.

"Executive Secretary Ermita can also be held responsible because he is in charge of these matters," Lacson said.

Escudero said Mrs. Arroyo's subordinates like Presidential Commission on Good Government chairman Camilo Sabio could be taking their cue from Mrs. Arroyo.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile threatened to have Sabio jailed and investigated if he could not explain his frequent travels abroad together with his family and friends.

Escudero said there would have been no issue if Mrs. Arroyo had been choosing only the essential trips and the people who would accompany her given the current economic crunch.

"Instead of 17, 20 or 30 congressmen, maybe she can bring along just two or three and do away with bystanders and those who only want a junket," Escudero said.

Escudero said it was important to know the gains of each of the President's trips because pledges of investments do not always push through.

"We should always look at the return on investment," Escudero said.

Escudero said Ermita could be made to explain but he believed that it was the President herself who decides on her travels.

"Clearly, he (Ermita) is acting under the instruction of and as alter ego of the President," he said.

Escudero said the issue could be raised during the budget deliberations, especially of the Office of the President.

"I think this will go a long way in so far as the standard for government officials using public money traveling abroad is concerned," Escudero said.

## Necessary expense

Malacañang defended its use of paid advertisements to highlight the benefits of President Arroyo's trips overseas as a necessary expense to inform the public about what the President is doing.

Deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said it is the responsibility of the Palace to inform the public about what the trips of the President are all about so as to remove the misconceptions brought about by criticisms from the opposition.

The President's critics have questioned the expenses incurred by the President for her trips, the estimates of which have gone as high as P8 billion since the start of her term in 2001.

While she could not provide the official figures for the travel expenses of the President, Fajardo said that it is definitely below the P8-billion mark stated by the opposition.

More than defending the trips, Fajardo said that the ads intend to explain the benefits derived from the foreign visits and how these would affect the lives of the people.

Fajardo emphasized that all of the President's

trips involve hard work and hectic schedules aimed at bringing in more investments for the country and opportunities for the people.

The President also had something to say to those who criticize the wisdom of her numerous trips overseas.

Speaking before members of the Filipino community in Hong Kong yesterday, the President emphasized that what she is doing is for the benefit of the people.

Mrs. Arroyo and her entourage were expected to be back in Manila last night.

The President explained that the investments she is attracting for the country would translate to jobs for the people.

## 'Eyeball' needed

Another congressman-ally of President Arroyo defended her foreign trips yesterday, saying the Chief Executive cannot conduct diplomacy or entice investors through networking websites Facebook, Friendster or Multiply.

Neither could these be accomplished through text messages, Palawan Rep. Antonio Alvarez said.

"It will be naïve to think that diplomacy can be conducted through Facebook or foreign affairs through Friendster. A leader must eyeball," he said.

"No nation can Twitter its way to investments or multiply its exports via Multiply. There is no substitute for face-to-face diplomacy, especially for a country like ours, which needs more investments for industries and more protection for millions of its workers abroad," he said.

For his part, Muntinlupa Rep. Rozzano Rufino Biazon said if the President could prove that her foreign trips are beneficial to the country, by all means, she could travel abroad again but she must trim her entourage to those absolutely necessary to accomplish her mission in the countries she would be visiting.

In the Tokyo-LA-Columbia-Brazil-Dubai-Hong Kong trip, officially, 16 congressmen and congresswomen, plus two to three senators, accompanied President Arroyo.

Several of her companions brought along their husbands or wives and other chaperones.

A House source, however, told reporters at least 32 House members joined the latest presidential trip.

## Reporting a must

Former president Fidel Ramos also rose to the defense of President Arroyo on her foreign trips but later suggested that she should report to the public regarding her travels for the sake of transparency.

The usual practice is for the President to report to the people before departing for abroad and then report again upon coming back, said Ramos, who made the statement before he left yesterday for a seven-day trip to several Canadian cities to participate in fund raising events organized by ANCOF (Answering the Call of the Poor) Foundation-Canada.

He said a report is also submitted by members of the President's entourage on what they were able to contribute in the undertaking.

Ramos advised critics who want to evaluate how much really came into the Philippines in terms of investments, tourism and even technology transfer to read economic reports prepared by various agencies in the country.

- With Marvin Sy, Jess Diaz, Rudy Santos, Eva Visperas, Rhodina Villanueva