

GMA, CIA chief meet today

By MARVIN SY

United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief Leon Panetta is scheduled to meet with President Arroyo today to discuss a "broad range of issues of mutual interest," including the war on terror.

Malacañang said Mrs. Arroyo's meeting with Panetta would be at the Music Room of the Palace at 1 p.m. Few other details of the meeting were made available.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, citing information from the US embassy in Manila, said there is no specific agenda for today's meeting.

"But considering that Panetta is the director of the CIA, I'm sure the discussions would focus on the issues of security and international terrorism," Remonde said.

Panetta's visit comes amid political jitters caused by a spate of bombings in Mindanao that many fear may spill over to Metro Manila.

Two days before Panetta's arrival in Manila, the



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National Capital Region Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines lowered its alert level for Metro Manila and downplayed reports of possible terrorist attacks in the nation's capital.

Remonde said Panetta's visit "only shows that the Philippines continues to enjoy a good international reputation owing largely in part to the very aggressive international engagement of the President."

Earlier this week, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said that in his visit, Panetta would reaffirm his country's common concern with the Philippines regarding security issues and international terrorism.

Ermita said the Philippines and the US have similar security concerns and a long-standing defense and security cooperation under the Mutual Defense Treaty, underpinned by the regular Balikatan joint military exercises.

Panetta, the 19th director of the CIA, was appointed by President Barack Obama to the post last Feb. 13.

Before his appointment to the top CIA post, Panetta served as congressman for the state of California and was chief of staff to former President Bill Clinton from July 1994 to January 1997.

Meanwhile, President Arroyo met with the delegates of the 5th Ambassadors, Consuls General and Tourism Directors Tour during their visit to Malacañang yesterday.

After their tour of the Palace, the delegates met with the President where they were apprised of the performance of the Philippine economy amid the global financial crisis.

The President said that although growth has slowed down, the Philippines is still better off than most of the other nations affected by the global financial crisis.

Mrs. Arroyo noted that the economy managed to post a positive growth of 4.4

percent in terms of gross national product and 0.4 percent in gross domestic product in the first quarter of the year.

"The stark reality is that our economic growth has slowed. We have been affected. But we are comparatively better off than most other nations," the President said.

The President noted that the June 2009 Asia-Pacific Sovereign Report Card of Standard and Poor's projected a 1.3 percent growth rate for the Philippines this year, which is well within the government's 0.8 to 1.8 percent growth forecast.

In its report, S&P noted that only nine of 21 countries reviewed, including the Philippines, are projected to post positive growth rate this year.

"This is still a reality from which we can and should take heart and hope," the President said.

She also noted that since 2001, the Philippine economy has posted uninterrupted growth for 33 quarters.