

Obama cautioned on talks with GMA

By PIA LEE-BRAGO

While President Arroyo's meeting at the White House next week will be an opportunity for US President Barack Obama to reaffirm RP-US ties, a US think tank urged Obama to be "clear" about what he will say to his counterpart so it will not be in-

terpreted as support for unconstitutional extension of her term or a change in the Constitution to allow her continued leadership.

Walter Lohman, director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation, said in his

Turn to Page 11

analysis "Time for the Administration to Turn to Substance in Southeast Asia" that Thailand and the Philippines are democracies whose people have the freedom to change their governments through the ballot box.

Lohman said a continued leadership of Arroyo, who is savaged in the press on a daily basis and every year she is put through the paces of an impeachment vote, will have destabilizing impact on the Philippines.

He said several factors tie the US more closely to the Philippines than any other country in Southeast Asia: a long, shared history of struggle, the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, current cooperation against terrorists in Mindanao, and even extensive family connections.

"President Arroyo's meeting at the White House will be an opportunity for President Obama to reaffirm these ties. He should also be clear, however, that his respect for President Arroyo is grounded in the constitutional order of the Philippines and the office she holds," Lohman said.

Although much of the speculation in Manila is unsubstantiated and politically motivated, Lohman said the Filipino public is obsessed with the possibility that Arroyo will attempt to hang on to office despite elections for her successor in May next year as many are looking to the example of Honduras to deduce the likely American response.

"But President Obama must be acutely aware of the circumstances. Anything he says that can be interpreted as support for an unconstitutional extension of President Arroyo's term or a change in the Constitution to otherwise allow for her continued leadership will have a destabilizing impact on the Philippines," he added.

Ousted speaker Jose de Venecia Jr. had disclosed that Arroyo almost declared martial law during the Peninsula Manila hotel siege in 2007.

De Venecia said Arroyo asked him to go to Washington to get former President George W. Bush's blessing for emergency rule.

Arroyo's visit to Washington and meeting with Obama at the White House will take place a week after the Obama administration engaged in high-level diplomacy with America's treaty allies and friends in Southeast Asia.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is in Bangkok to meet with Thailand's leadership, including Prime

Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya.

She will then go on to attend the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference and ASEAN Regional Forum.

"It is well worth the minor investment in time, attention, and transpacific travel to remind America's friends and allies - as well as its rivals - that the United States is in Asia to stay," Lohman said.

Washington clearly recognizes the importance of this message as the Obama administration has arrived at a point where it must turn to substance, he said.

"Now seven months into its first term, the Obama administration's key policy people, including an Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, are in place. Engagement is not an end in itself. The administration must now begin to make some of the tough policy choices," he said.

He said that even though no ASEAN trade agreement approaches the "gold standard" of US Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), the regional grouping's agreements constitute a formal economic integration that America is largely watching from the sidelines.

Lohman added that neither the ASEAN nor the US can move forward from the continuing impasse in Burma.

"The problem of Burma's dogged and brutal authoritarianism encapsulates a fundamental issue: whether ASEAN can find a rule-based 'new ASEAN way' that, among other things, upholds its charter's commitment to democracy, rule of law, and fundamental freedoms."

He pointed out that the ASEAN meetings in Phuket this week are already off to a poor start with the adoption of terms of reference for its new human rights commission that empower it only to promote the concept of human rights, not to monitor or investigate abuses, let alone punish them.

"The idea that this can evolve into something with more teeth - when the same members are there to block it - is a pipe dream," he said.

At this point in time, high-level contact and/or normalization of diplomatic relations would demoralize the opposition by taking away the small amount of leverage that sanctions give them.

"If there is more the US can do to help with HIV/AIDS and other issues, it should, but it should not change the measure by which it allocates assistance. This is the Burma policy the US should bring to Bangkok, the ASEAN meetings, and President Arroyo," Lohman said.