

GMA excited over final SONA

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo is "excited" to deliver her final State of the Nation Address (SONA) before a joint session of Congress on Monday and would not be distracted by protest actions, Malacañang said yes-

terday.

Speaking to reporters yesterday, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo would make an accounting, not just of the year past, but of

Turn to Page 11

her entire term of office during the SONA.

"It is a highly anticipated address because for the first time, the President will be giving an accounting, not just of the year past, but of her entire term," he said.

"It will be an opportunity for her not just to recount the very long list of achievements on her watch, but also to commend her unfinished legacy to her successor in office, and to remind our people of her vision for the country that has inspired and guided her from the very start of her presidency," he said.

Remonde asked critics to give the SONA the respect and attention it deserves.

"Sadly, the prophets of pessimism, as usual, are jumping at this opportunity to debase what should be an inspiring moment in our history," he said.

"They will not spare us, even at this time, from their unceasing, unfounded, and unhelpful attempts to advance personal and ideological agenda, at the expense of national optimism about our prospects for the future."

Remonde is confident the people will see through the political noise and dismiss it for what it is — nothing but a "charade of smoke and mirrors."

It was under the Arroyo administration that the country was placed on the path of economic recovery, he added.

Gabriel Claudio, presidential adviser for political affairs, told reporters Malacañang does not expect the protest rallies to be any different from those staged in previous SONAs.

"In the spirit of democratic space, we allow and tolerate those activities as long as they are within the bounds of the law," he said.

"The President has always given great importance to the SONA, not only as a speech, not only as a report but as a tradition and institution that is so much part of our democratic process."

Remonde and Claudio said they expect some political issues to be tackled in the SONA to clarify some matters.

The SONA would tackle political issues at "a higher level of discourse," according to presidential economic spokesman Gary Olivar.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said politics is something that cannot be totally dissociated from the speech of the President. "Remember there are people with divergent political beliefs, so I think it's within her right to prove critics wrong and to that extent it cannot be avoided (that she) address the issue of politics," he said.

Foreigners warned vs joining protests

Immigration Commissioner Marcelino Libanan warned yesterday foreigners of arrest and deportation if they join the protest actions against Mrs. Arroyo on Monday.

"The moment a foreigner is caught holding an anti-State of the Nation Address placard or steps on an anti-Arroyo stage, that could earn his or her ticket out of the country," he said.

"We would also ban them from re-entering the Philippines by putting them in our blacklist of undesirable aliens."

Immigration intelligence chief Faizal Hussin said 16 BI agents with film and

video cameras will document the actions of foreigners during Monday's rallies.

"There should be evidence such as if they are holding placards, shouting (anti-government statements) or speaking on the stage," he said.

Hussin said BI agents will gather information for purposes of identification through photographs, passports, residence addresses and immigration status of foreigners taking part in mass actions.

In past rallies, sites, the BI had difficulty separating rally participants from onlookers, he added.

Taking part in mass actions is tantamount to interfering in the country's internal affairs in violation of immigration laws, Hussin said.

Meanwhile, Libanan has ordered the BI law enforcement division to investigate nine Belgian activists who allegedly took part in a protest march in Bacoor, Cavite Wednesday night.

Wilfredo Poquez, Law Enforcement Division acting chief, will coordinate with the Bacoor police in verifying the immigration status of the Belgians and in tracing their whereabouts, he added.

A report from the Bacoor police identified the Belgians as Johan Demettenaere, Mario Alessandro Bauwens, Stefanie Devloo, Nicky Broeckhoven, Marlies Geldof, Jelle Eeckout, Oreet Vantieometi, Mattia de Pauw, and Chiara Donadoni.

'Millions are now hungry'

Sen. Francis Escudero disclosed yesterday millions of Filipinos have become hungry under Mrs. Arroyo's watch.

"This is deadlier than climate change for its effects are immediate and devastating to millions of families who have no other recourse but to beg, steal, or borrow, as the song goes, because they cannot turn to government for help," he said.

Escudero said a Social Weather Stations survey showed that while the incidence of hunger fell to a certain extent from 1998 to 2003, the number of Filipinos experiencing hunger began to rise from 2005.

"There was, as the SWS chief Mahar Mangahas said, an unfavorable change in the hunger climate which would require radical changes in the policy and governance environment which this administration failed to undertake," he said.

Escudero said the next administration must launch key reforms in the agriculture sector to eliminate hunger, ensure food security, and break the cycle of grinding poverty in the country.

"The fight against poverty will be won in the countryside," he said.

"We need to focus on programs that will transform our depressed rural communities into growth centers. Then development will radiate from the countryside to our cities."

Escudero said the government must focus on expanding irrigation, build more post-harvest facilities, extend financial and technical support for farmers, and gather data to determine what crops to plant and when and where they should be planted to maximize the use of agricultural lands.

"After winning the peace, the next administration must focus on agriculture from day one so our country and people will overcome the challenges that lie ahead," he said. — With Evelyn Macairan, Aurea Calica, Jose Rodol Clapano, Katherine Adraneda