

'Fighting GMA' to focus on education, economy

By PAOLO ROMERO

Filipinos will see a "fighting and determined" President Arroyo when she delivers her final State of the Nation Address (SONA) today, according to Malacañang.

Her SONA will focus on education and the economy as well as address some critical issues that have been hounding her administration in the

past eight years, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said yesterday, adding that contrary to expectations, it will not be about "politics as usual."

"I can promise you that you are in for a very interesting SONA where you will see a fighting and a determined President," Remonde told gov-

ernment-run *dzRB*.

Mrs. Arroyo herself addressed journalists yesterday at the Palace in what officials described as a "pre-SONA

Turn to Page 7

Fighting From Page 1

event" where she gathered education experts for last-minute consultations to firm up the administration's agenda for the sector in its remaining 11 months.

The President said she had tapped experts across the government to crosscheck "every conceivable issue that will be discussed in the SONA; national security; the economy; social services and healthcare; infrastructures, and more."

"The economy has been the central organizing principle of my administration," Mrs. Arroyo said. "Without a good economy, we cannot have a high quality of life, and only way for our hard-working citizens to take advantage of a strong economy is through attaining a sound education."

She also underscored the importance of a giving good education to every Filipino.

"No issue is more important to me than education. Our children are our future. Education is the ticket to better life," she said.

Education experts and officials present at the last minute consultations in Malacañang reported to Mrs. Arroyo that there is a significant drop in the incidence

of malnutrition among public elementary school children from 21 percent to 17 percent in 2007 due to the school-feeding program, according to Presidential Task Force on Education (PTFE) head Mona Valisno.

"School attendance has improved from 90 percent in 2006 to 95 percent in 2007. To date, 10,768 schools benefited from the program involving 921,084 pupils," Valisno said.

Also, two of the three boys presented by Mrs. Arroyo in her first SONA in 2001 visited her at the Palace on Sunday to personally thank her for the scholarships they received from her. It was learned that some 500 other children whose families were living at the Payatas dumpsite were also granted scholarships by the President.

The three boys, Jason Vann Banogan, Jomar Pabalan and Erwin Dolera, known as the "Bangkang papel boys" belong to thousands of families left homeless when Payatas collapsed and buried some of its 1000 residents in 2000.

The three boys were given the monicker after they wrote their aspirations in paper boats they floated in the Pasig River to reach Malacañang in a symbolic ceremony.

- With Rainier Allan Ronda