

GMA group wined, dined in NY resto — for \$20K

By RHODINA VILLANUEVA

Makati City Mayor Jejomar Binay yesterday deplored the alleged extravagance of President Arroyo and her US entourage after they ran up a bill of \$20,000 – or the equivalent of P960,000 – in an upscale New York restaurant.

Malacañang confirmed that Mrs. Arroyo and First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo wined and dined at the famous Le Cirque restaurant in New York City during her working visit to the United States last week, but stressed that it was upon the invitation of Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez, who footed the bill.

Romualdez accompanied Mrs. Arroyo on her US trip where she had a meeting with President Barack Obama.

Binay, who is also United Opposition president, said the extravagance is a manifestation of the Arroyo administration's insensitivity and hypocrisy while thousands of families suffer hunger and the nation was mourning the death of former President Corazon

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Aquino.

"The Arroyo administration talks about giving honor and respect to the memory of the former president. It seems that spending an astonishing amount of money - enough to provide almost 3,000 hungry families with three square meals - appears to be their idea of honoring and respecting Cory," he said.

Binay said Mrs. Arroyo and her party appeared to be in a celebratory mood, with Mrs. Arroyo herself reportedly ordering expensive wine.

The dinner was held a few hours before they left for Manila to "pay their respects" to

the former president at the Manila Cathedral.

"While the nation was in mourning, a report that Mrs. Arroyo and her people were celebrating in New York with expensive wine leaves a bad taste in the mouth," he said.

An item in Page Six of the *New York Post* dated Aug. 7, 2009 said, "The economic downturn hasn't persuaded everyone to pinch pennies. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was at Le Cirque the other night with a large entourage enjoying the good life. Even though the former comptroller of her country's armed services,

Carlos Garcia, was found guilty earlier this year of perjury and two of his sons were arrested in the US on bulk cash-smuggling charges, Macapagal-Arroyo ordered several bottles of very expensive wine, pushing the dinner tab up to \$20,000."

A copy of Mrs. Arroyo's tab, which has been posted in several blogs, showed her ordering 11 bottles of Krug champagne priced at \$510 per bottle. The entourage also feasted on Osetra caviar (\$1,400 for five ounces), a "Chef's Tasting Menu" or wine paired with a dish (\$4,500 for 25 orders) and a "three-course Chef's Seasonal Menu" (\$1,450 for 25 orders).

Binay said the amount is enough to provide three square meals to 2,956 families living on the poverty threshold. "If you consider that an average family has six members, the P960,000 would have fed 18,000 Filipinos for one day," he said.

"What they did was deplorable, especially if taxpayers' money was spent. If they spent private money, what they did was in bad taste and again showed insensitivity to the millions of Filipinos who face hunger daily," he said.

Clueless on bill

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde clarified that he did not know how much the dinner cost since it was the

"host" who took care of the bill.

"As to how much the dinner costs, Malacañang does not know as it was the host who chose the menu and picked up the tab," Remonde said in a text message.

He said there was no partying as claimed by reports from several blogs but "just pure and simple dinner."

The Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan) yesterday demanded that Malacañang explain the reported extravagant dinner tab at Le Cirque in New York.

"Malacañang has a lot of explaining to do about this latest allegation, which came out in an American paper. Who spent for the lavish dinner? Is it appropriate for a head of state of a Third World country like Mrs. Arroyo to wine and dine in such a manner,

given that we're in the midst of a crisis?" asked Renato Reyes Jr., secretary general of Bayan.

Bayan said that even if someone else paid the tab, it still would not be appropriate.

"It's embarrassing for the Philippines to have such write-ups appear in a foreign paper. It begs the question, what is Mrs. Arroyo really doing during her trips? Are taxpayers being made to shoulder the lavish lifestyles of the so-called rich and famous?" Reyes said.

"This ostentatious display of affluence reminiscent of Imelda Marcos reinforces the perception that Philippine officials are corrupt and are living it up while others wallow in crisis. It is truly disappointing and disgusting," Reyes said. - With Marvin Sy and Katherine Adraneda