

'NY dinner report exaggerated; no taxpayers' money spent'

By PAOLO ROMERO

Malacañang branded yesterday as "grossly exaggerated" and "fruits of a poisoned tree" reports that President Arroyo and her party spent \$20,000 for dinner in an upscale New York restaurant during her working visit to the US.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde blamed the militant group Bayan for the reports,

which he said is on a mission to "spread agitation propaganda against the administration of President Arroyo."

Remonde said Bayan is a communist front organization dedicated to overthrowing the government by all means.

He described the report on the dinner as "agitation propaganda" aimed at stoking pub-

lic anger.

"This report is grossly exaggerated being a black propaganda as it is," he said.

Remonde was among Mrs. Arroyo's entourage at the dinner at the famous Le Cirque restaurant.

Malacañang on Saturday said Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez

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hosted the dinner and footed the bill.

Remonde though admitted that he does not know how much the dinner cost Romualdez.

According to Remonde, they went to the restaurant for "a simple, late, late night dinner" because they came in late from Washington after the meeting between Mrs. Arroyo and President Barack Obama at the White House.

"Of course we were very hungry then. There were only about two tables taken (by the group) and what we ordered was a set menu that is common to restaurants and hotels around the world," he said.

Remonde said "there was soup, salad, the main course, drinks and of course tea or coffee after."

"So those reports that there were expensive champagne or fancy food items are not true," Remonde said. "Juan de la Cruz did not spend a single centavo on that simple dinner."

Remonde said he got the impression that Romualdez was a friend of the restaurant's owner or chef.

Quezon Rep. Danilo Suarez, one of the 28 lawmakers who accompanied Mrs. Arroyo during the US visit, said the price tag for the dinner was "reasonable."

"The food is good but the place is not fashionable. With our numbers, the \$20,000 is cheaper," Suarez said.

Since Filipinos are hospitable people, Suarez said the delegation allowed those who accompanied them to partake of dinner, "including the American security personnel assigned to the President by the State Department."

"I don't see anything wrong. It is expected for critics to create an issue out of nothing just for the sake of media mileage," he said.

But for Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who was among the President's entourage during the US visit, the dinner was "outlandish" and "excessive."

"I myself am shocked with that price... (It's) outlandish that people from a developing country should rack up a bill for P1 million," Santiago said over ~~at~~BB yesterday.

"My opinion, by far, (is) it was too excessive for the circumstances of the country and even if it was paid for by another person, that person did not do President Arroyo a favor. But if it was paid for by Malacañang then I would say that perhaps the President is under pressure to give the representatives some of her time because they hardly see her. Some of them were on a shopping spree," Santiago said.

According to the New York Post report, President Arroyo ordered 11 bottles of Krug champagne priced at \$510 per bottle.

The entourage also feasted on Osetra caviar (\$1,400 per 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).

Appetizers included lobster salad, wild burgundy escargot and soft shell crab tempura.

Santiago said she did not join the dinner because she had excused herself from joining evening functions due to her chronic fatigue syndrome. She learned about the lavish dinner the next day.

"I was surprised... it is a very expensive restaurant. They should not have chosen that place. They should have gone to a cheaper one," Santiago said. "They are like jetsetters, like international celebrities."

The feisty senator recalled telling the President, when the chief executive asked, that she orders hotel food and sometimes ate at Vietnamese restaurants where a rice meal costs only \$10.

She added that the enormous bill at the Le Cirque was really to have "prestige and for the privilege of seeing and being seen."

"I don't like that. I feel very uncomfortable, dressing up for evening functions where I need to wear makeup and jewelry," Santiago said.

Santiago gave the Palace an unsolicited advice to just apologize for the "mistake in judgment."

"There is no need to cover it up. Simply say who were present, who footed the bill, (and) say that it won't happen again," she said.

Santiago noted that the President's critics are in a position to question the lavish dinner that happened on the eve of Mrs. Arroyo's return to the country in time to reach the wake of former President Corason Aquino. The former president was buried last Aug. 5.

"Well, it is a constitutional provision, the right of the people for information on matters of public concern shall be recognized," she said. - With Christina Mendez, Jess Diaz, Helen Flores