

Palace: GMA overspent travel budget by P1 B

By MARVIN SY

Malacañang admitted yesterday that the Office of the President had exceeded its budget allocation for travel expenses by over P1 billion from 2001 to 2009 but insisted that there was nothing wrong with it.

Deputy Executive Secretary for administration and finance Susana Vargas presented figures showing the overspending at a press briefing in Malacañang yesterday.

Vargas disclosed that P1.4 billion had been allocated for local and foreign trips of the Office of the President (OP) from 2001 to 2009 but the actual amount spent was close to P2.5 billion.

Vargas noted that on a yearly basis, the OP received P130 million for travel expenses until 2007, when the figure was raised to P170 million and then to P244.6 million each for 2008 and this year.

Malacañang's disclosure came on the heels of an announcement by Bukidnon Rep. Teofisto Guingona III that the OP exceeded its travel budget by P1.3 billion from 2002 to 2008. Guingona said his figures were provided by the Commission on Audit (COA).

But Vargas explained that there was nothing irregular about the OP's travel expenses and that it was allowed to draw from "savings" on other items in the miscellaneous and other operating expenditures provision in the OP's budget.

She said that most of the additional funds needed for the travels were taken from the maintenance and other operating expenses (MOOE) while only P67 million was taken

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from the contingency funds.

"The difference was drawn from our regular MOOE. It's allowed. It's still within the allotment cast," Vargas said.

Deputy presidential spokesman Gary Olivar also defended the Palace's travel expenses.

"It is the ability provided within the GAA (General Appropriations Act) to cover expenditures on any given item in excess of the budget allocation by savings from other budget items and it should be within the appropriately authorized class," Olivar said.

"For example, under the local or foreign travel which is an item under MOOE, the savings have to come

from class of MOOE," he explained.

Olivar also defended the use of the contingency fund for President Arroyo's travel expenses, saying it is legal.

"When the congressman said that the entire contingency fund was exhausted because of the travels, he is wrong. The contingency fund can be used for other MOOE in excess of allocation as provided by the law. So he misspeaks," Olivar said, referring to Guingona.

The controversy over the President's travel expenditures came immediately after reports on her supposed lavish dinners in US restaurants with her entourage and friends. The controversy overshadowed re-

ports on her meeting with US President Barack Obama.

Vargas noted that Mrs. Arroyo's trip to the US cost the taxpayers a total of P19.19 million.

But Olivar emphasized that the overall benefits of the trips should also be taken into account.

"This is a mishmash of numbers. If we look at all the numbers together, we are looking at over \$6 billion, a very rough estimate. That's about 312,000 dinners at Le Cirque, assuming that the number is correct, which by the way, the restaurant management has denied," Olivar said.

Le Cirque was the posh restaurant in New York where Mrs. Arroyo and her entourage had dinner.

According to the New York Post, the presidential entourage was billed

\$20,000 for the dinner.

An article in the Filipino Reporter quoting the contact manager of Le Cirque denied the \$20,000 bill reported by the New York Post.

At yesterday's briefing, Vargas also clarified that the OP did not spend a single centavo for the expenses of the members of Congress who accompanied the President to the US.

Probe, not excuses

Guingona, meanwhile, challenged Speaker Prospero Nograles yesterday to lead an inquiry on allegations of overspending in Mrs. Arroyo's foreign travels instead of making excuses for the controversy, which has sparked public uproar.

"I had expected that, as the leader of the House, Speaker Nograles

would be the first in ensuring the proper use of the budget, especially so because the power over the purse is exclusively entrusted to Congress," Guingona said.

"Instead, he is providing excuses for the abuse of budget," he told reporters at a press briefing.

Guingona earlier said a Commission on Audit briefing last Aug.12 revealed that in 2008, the Office of the President spent P920 million from the contingency fund when the budget only allowed for P800 million.

"From previous hearings I already knew that the travel expenses of the Office of the President in excess of the budget was, in fact charged to the contingency fund," Guingona said.

- With Perseus Echeminada