

'Benefits far outweigh costs of GMA trips'

By MARVIN SY and JESS DIAZ

As President Arroyo continued to draw flak for her foreign travels, Malacañang said yesterday the trips should be seen as her "aggressive salesmanship on behalf of our country abroad."

"Was actual spending too high or was the budget number too low? This is a matter for serious management analysis, not just sound bites for media purposes

or to advance one's political stock," Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said in a statement.

"Least of all, should the budget be used to score political

points? This does a great disservice not only to the President, but to our people who deserve the full benefit of her aggressive salesmanship on behalf of our country

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abroad," he added.

"You also have to look at how much total resources you had, what are the other items you spent for, what were the objectives of your travels and whether or not those objectives were fulfilled or even exceeded," he said.

Brandishing data from the Commission on Audit, Bukidnon Rep. Teofisto Guingona III criticized the President for supposedly overspending on her foreign trips by as much as P1.3 billion over an eight-year period.

Malacañang, through Deputy Executive Secretary for administration and finance Susana Vargas, admitted that it exceeded the budget allocated for travel expenses but explained that the balance was derived from savings of other items in the maintenance and other operating expenses (MOOE) in the budget of the Office of the President, which is allowed under the law.

Remonde reiterated that P2.5 billion is small compared to the over \$7 billion in aid, trade, sales, investments, grants and other benefits that resulted from the foreign travels.

In her US trips alone, Remonde said that the total benefits have amounted to an estimated \$6.2 billion already.

The gains, he said, reflect in security and aid development (\$136 million), the Generalized

System of Preferences (\$1.6 billion), benefits for Filipino veterans (\$198 million), estimated benefits from the "save our industries bill" (\$2.2 billion), military assistance since 1999 (\$429 million), aid for Mindanao (\$312 million), Coca-Cola Co. investment (\$1 billion).

"This did not include benefits from OFWs working in these countries. Any of these numbers is well in excess of the P2.5 billion or about \$50 million that has been spent on both local and foreign travels by the President since 2001," Remonde said.

Remonde also hit back at critics for accusing Mrs. Arroyo of insensitivity to the plight of the poor.

He emphasized that the President's focus on strengthening the economy would eventually redound to the benefit of the poor.

Remonde noted that the President has increased the conditional cash transfer assistance program to the poorest of the poor by a full 50 percent.

"The program is now nationwide and we hope Congress will heed her call to enact it permanently into law. This is anti-hunger and pro-poor governance at work, not just symbolic or feel good gestures," he said.

He also said that under the administration, OFW remittances have reached a total of \$8.5

billion for the first half of the year and that according to the Department of Labor and Employment, several companies that suffered from the global crisis have started recalling their laid off Filipino workers.

"This recall of laid off workers is yet another sign of our economic resilience and recovery," Remonde said.

"Allow me to reiterate that this is the kind of progress by which the President's empathy for our poorest countrymen should be measured," he added.