

# GMA's next stops: London, Saudi

By MARICHU VILLANUEVA

Still smarting from the flak concerning her latest visit to the United States, President Arroyo is embarking on yet another trip that will take her this time to Saudi Arabia and London starting Sept. 23.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo told **The STAR** yesterday the President has

accepted the invitation to make a state visit to Saudi Arabia as well as an invitation to speak before an international forum organized by the London-based magazine *The Economist*.

Romulo said preparations are underway to ensure a successful state

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visit in the oil-rich Arab country which hosts and employs close to a million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).

Her forthcoming trip to Saudi Arabia is her second visit there this year. When Mrs. Arroyo went to Davos, Switzerland on Jan. 31, she made a side trip to Riyadh after a stopover in Milan, Italy. From Riyadh, she proceeded to Bahrain and then to the US to attend the prayer breakfast, returning to Manila on Feb. 8. The President first made a working visit to Riyadh in 2006 when she negotiated for the release of several OFWs jailed in Saudi Arabia for various offenses.

Meanwhile, Romulo broke his silence on the brouhaha over the lavish dinner in New York that President Arroyo and her official delegation had during their trip to the US last July 29 to Aug. 4.

A few days after the President returned to Manila, reports from the *New York Post* came out that she and her official entourage had a \$20,000 dinner at the pricey and upscale Le Cirque restaurant in New York.

Romulo particularly took strong exception to text messages being passed around that salaries of Department of Foreign Affairs employees at the Philippine consulate in New York were delayed because funds were purportedly used to pay for the expenses of the President and her official entourage that included First Gentleman Jose

Miguel Arroyo and their son, Camarines Sur Rep. Dato Arroyo.

"It's not true. It's what they call a 'hatchet job,' those stories that came out," Romulo said.

"Our Philippine consul-general Cecille Rebono told me they did not spend for the President and her official entourage while they were in New York," he pointed out.

The latest Palace disclosure explained that the Le Cirque dinner was a party for the 41st wedding anniversary of the President and the First Gentleman hosted by the New York-based architect brother of Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez, who was part of the 28-member congressional delegation to the US trip. The congressman nephew of former first lady Imelda Marcos, however, has refused to comment on the controversy up to now.

Another congressman, Rep. Danilo Suarez, confessed that he, too, hosted a dinner for the President and the First Gentleman and the rest of the delegation right after the White House meeting in Washington. Suarez claimed he paid \$15,000 for a dinner at Bobby Van's Steakhouse in Washington.

Susana Vargas, Malacañang's senior deputy executive secretary for finance, subsequently clarified that the Palace only paid for the expenses of the President and the First Gentleman, Speaker Prospero Nograles, Senators Miriam Defensor-Santiago

and Lito Lapid.

Cabinet members who joined the US trip led by Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, Romulo, Finance Secretary Margarito Teves, Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, Metro Manila Development Authority chairman Bayani Fernando charged their travel expenses to their respective departments.

On the part of the congressmen who joined the presidential trip to the US, Nograles earlier claimed that each of them was paying their own travel expenses. But Manila

Rep. Bienvenido Abante admitted he did not pay for anything and assumed Malacañang paid for his plane ticket and hotel accommodations. Abante said he and his fellow congressmen who joined the US trip of the President are willing to pay back the Palace, but he said they do not know where and to whom to pay their bills, which they will charge to their foreign travel allowances from the House of Representatives.

After so much controversy over the latest US trip, the DFA Secretary declined to say if they would be stricter this time

with members of the official entourage of Mrs. Arroyo in her forthcoming trips to London and Saudi Arabia.

Romulo pointed out it is not for the executive branch to restrain congressmen from tagging along on presidential trips, saying it's the call of the House leadership.

This would be the seventh foreign trip that the President will be making this year. She previously also went to Thailand (Feb. 28 to March 1); Egypt and Syria (May 1-5); South Korea and Russia (May 30 to June 7); and Japan and Brazil (June 17 to 25).