

2010 elections up in GMA-Hillary meet

Manila visit on Nov. 12-13

By MARVIN ST

President Arroyo and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will discuss election issues - including the turn-over of power in 2010 - in their meeting at Malacatang on Nov. 12-13.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, in an interview over Radyo ng Bayan, said the objective of Clinton's visit would be to discuss the holding of peaceful elections as well as other matters of mutual interest.

President Arroyo will reassure Clinton of "a peaceful and orderly transition of power," Remonde said.

"Definitely that's the objective. That's what our President is working for that is why she is pushing for the automation of the elections," Remonde said, referring to the meeting's top agenda.

"And of course this includes the peaceful and orderly transition of power because that is also the objective of the President," Remonde said.

He reiterated that the Palace is committed to fully supporting the Commission on Elections to ensure the holding of

honest, orderly and peaceful elections.

During her two-day visit to Manila, Clinton will also "hold consultations with senior Filipino officials, highlighting the US-Philippines treaty alliance," Clinton's spokesman Ian Kelly told reporters.

Meanwhile, the first ASEAN-US Leaders' Meeting will be held in Singapore on Nov. 15, to be attended by US President Barack Obama.

President Arroyo will also attend the meeting, the first between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the US in the 32 years of ASEAN-US relations.

The Philippines is the country coordinator for ASEAN-US relations.

Clinton in Washington said Friday she will travel to the Philippines next week to "show solidarity" with the

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storm-battered nation, just after her visits to Singapore and Berlin.

"I'll be going to the Philippines, to show solidarity with our friends in the Philippines who have been battered by typhoons and have just suffered so much over the last weeks," Clinton said in a speech in Washington.

Typhoon "Santi" last week swept across the main island of Luzon, dumping heavy rain and bringing strong winds just weeks after tropical storm "On-

doy" and typhoon "Pepang" left about 1,100 dead and tens of thousands homeless.

Remonde said Clinton's scheduled visit is a welcome development. The last time Clinton visited the country was when she was still First Lady of her husband former President Bill Clinton.

He noted that the Clintons have a close relationship with President Arroyo. Former President Clinton and Mrs. Arroyo were classmates at Georgetown University in the US.

"And again, for us, this visit of Secretary Clinton further shows that the relationship between America and the Philippines is very good," he added.

"This visit by Secretary Clinton is a good opportunity for the Philippine and US governments to have substantial discussions on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest - disaster management, the Mindanao peace process, Philippine efforts to climate change, and nuclear non-proliferation," Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo said.

Clinton's visit will take place as the Philippines pins its hopes on the US State Department to drop the conditions for keeping US military aid to the country.

On Friday, Romulo said the Obama administration recently requested in its submission of its budget request for 2010 the deletion of the conditions for the release of \$2 million in security assistance to the Philippines.

Romulo downplayed the reported withholding of the \$2-million worth of military aid to the Philippines in 2009 allegedly owing to the human rights abuses rained by groups and churches in the US.

While the conditions for the \$2 million in US security assistance remain in the proposed appropriation bill for 2010 of the US House of Representatives, the DFA clarified that the US Congress has yet to adopt a final version of the bill.

Romulo said the US Congress has pushed for higher US military assistance to the Philippines similar to previous years' levels.

Romulo said, "Both Houses of the US Congress have recommended close to double the amount requested by the Obama administration for foreign military assistance."

He added that the Philippine request is the second largest amount of military

assistance in the Asia-Pacific region.

Clinton will then visit Singapore for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) ministerial meeting ahead of the APEC summit, at which President Obama will make his inaugural appearance.

She will be in Singapore from Nov. 10 to 12, before returning a day later from the Philippines to join Obama at the summit, aides said.

Clinton also announced she will join Obama during his visit to China from Nov. 15 to 18, her second trip as chief diplomat to the country the Obama administration recognizes as a key global player.

In a flurry of travel announcements this week, Clinton and her aides announced her tour of Europe and Asia, one that comes on top of a tour of Pakistan and the Middle East that only ended on Wednesday.

Clinton's visit to the Philippines and her trips earlier in the year to Japan, Indonesia, Korea and Japan plus President Obama's visit this month to Japan, Singapore, China and Korea underscore the US commitment and engagement in Asia and the Pacific, officials said.

Before the change of administration from Republican George W. Bush to Democrat Obama Southeast Asian leaders in particular were critical of Washington for allegedly neglecting the region because of preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told a press briefing that President Obama's talks with APEC leaders would focus on the health of the world economy.

He said North Korea, non-proliferation, energy and climate change would also be discussed. - With Jose Katigbak, Pia Lee-Brage, AFP and AP