

# 'RP no longer sick man of Asia'

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Pamintuan and his team met with leaders of the Filipino-American community in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. They will meet with Filipino-American leaders in San Francisco this weekend.

Noting that infrastructure development is key to mitigating the impact of the global crisis, Pamintuan enumerated several key infrastructure projects being implemented in the Luzon Urban Beltway super region, which covers Central Luzon, Metro Manila and the Southern Luzon provinces.

He said these projects are mainly road and highway networks, rail systems, airports and seaports that are aimed to interconnect the production and industrial enclaves of Southern Luzon to the commercial and consumption centers of Metro Manila, and to the rest of the world through the freeports of Clark and Subic.

"We are trying to create a seamless network of multi-modal transport-oriented infrastructures that would promote greater efficiency in the movement of goods, services, people and information," Pamintuan said, adding that these projects would greatly reduce the cost of doing business.

"Because of the global crisis, companies would now be locating to areas where there are efficient facilities and where the cost of doing business is lower. Add to this the availability of highly-skilled Filipino labor, I believe we can even take advantage of the opportunities offered by the global economic situation," he explained.

Consumido, meantime, presented the measures being put in place by government to mitigate the impact of the global economic meltdown. He cited the optimism of global financial institutions and credit rating agencies on the chances of the Philippines in even benefiting from the situation.

For his part, Cauquiran presented the dramatic development of Clark and Subic as freeport zones where major global economic players are now among their locators. He also cited the record growth in passenger traffic of the Diosdado Macapagal International Airport (DMIA) in Clark, which, he said, is fast developing to be the main international gateway of the country.

He said the DMIA has better runways and radar systems that can accommodate the biggest airplanes in the world, including the gigantic Airbus 380. The DMIA has since become a hub for budget international airlines catering to overseas Filipino workers from Central and Northern Luzon.

On the issue of human rights, Pamintuan said that the recent US State Department country assessment on human rights in the Philippines is "more or less fair." He said the report noted that the necessary policies, laws and institutions are in place to protect human rights, but their implementation has to be more strictly ensured.

He declared that the human rights situation has greatly improved in the Philippines in the last two years, particularly on the issue of unexplained killings. He said that from a high of 145 verified cases in 2006, the figures went down to six in 2007 and to five in 2008.

"We should have zero tolerance on political killings, but there is still a long-running insurgency in some parts of the countryside, and a Moro rebellion in the south. These are dirty little wars, and the combatants of both sides are accusing each other of committing certain atrocities," said Pamintuan, a human rights lawyer imprisoned during Martial Law.

"There is no country in the world that can claim a perfect human rights situation," he said. "Not even the US can lay claim to that." ■

# Government-run plan could trip up health overhaul

by RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR  
AP Writer

WASHINGTON — Giving Americans the option of buying medical coverage through the government—an idea put forth by President Barack Obama—is a potential deal breaker for some Republicans and insurance companies whose support would ease the way for a health care overhaul.

The proposal, which Obama advocated in his presidential campaign, would for the first time offer government-sponsored coverage to middle class families, as an alternative to private health plans. By some estimates, it could reduce premiums by 20 percent or more—making it much more affordable to cover the estimated 48 million people who don't have health coverage.

But insurers fear competition from a government plan could drive them out of business, and Republicans worry it would lead to a government takeover of health care. Liberals, meanwhile, are equally adamant that Americans deserve the choice of government-sponsored health care.

Such a plan could be similar to what seniors have in Medicare, which is government run. Or it might be designed like the federal employee health plan, available to members of Congress, and delivered through



President Barack Obama greets lawmakers at the White House Forum on Health Reform in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Thursday, March 5, 2009. AP Photo by Charles Dharapak

private insurers.

Whatever he decides, Obama could find himself trapped between liberals in his own party and conservatives he's trying to woo in support of a health care overhaul.

Asked about the issue at the White House health care summit this week, the president said he would address the qualms. And while saying he wanted to consider all ideas, he did not abandon the notion of a government plan.

"I'm not going to respond definitively," Obama said, answering a question from Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa. "The thinking on the public option has been that it gives consumers more choices and it helps ... keep the private sector honest, because there's

some competition out there.

Obama says he is committed to preserving a health care system in which government, employers and individuals share responsibility. Many Americans may not realize the government already picks up nearly half the nation's \$2.4 trillion health care bill, through programs including Medicare and Medicaid.

A public plan for the middle class could give a final nudge that puts the system squarely in government hands.

Obama's campaign proposal—a foundation for Democrats in Congress—called for setting up a national insurance marketplace through which individuals and small businesses could buy coverage. People could pick private insurance or opt for a

public plan that would resemble coverage for federal employees.

A recent analysis by the Commonwealth Fund, a nonprofit group that sponsors health care research, is giving supporters of a public plan some ammunition.

The study estimated costs and coverage under a hypothetical health reform plan similar to what Obama proposed in the campaign. It found that a public plan like Medicare could reduce projected health care costs by about \$2 trillion over an 11-year period.

Premiums in the public plan would be at least 20 percent lower, partly because of reduced administrative costs. Within a decade or so, some 105 million people would be in the public plan, compared with about 107 million with private insurance. ■

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