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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

GMA to meet with Obama...

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pointed out.

Malacañang said President Arroyo "has accepted the invitation to meet" with Obama.

"President Arroyo will discuss our poverty alleviation and economic resiliency programs, good governance, counter terrorism efforts and its contribution to peace and stability in the region," Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said.

"This visit is an affirmation of the strong partnership between the two countries," he said.

President Arroyo, who last visited Washington in June 2008 and met then-president George W. Bush in the White House, is also scheduled to meet "key US government officials and members of Congress," as well as entrepreneurs and business groups.

Remonde said it was not surprising that Washington extended the invitation to President Arroyo to meet Obama.

He said US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney already dropped hints several days ago that a meeting between President Arroyo and Obama is in the works.

President Arroyo was criticized last year for what opposition leaders described as a desperate attempt to seek an audience with Obama.

Last February, President Arroyo made an unscheduled side trip to Washington capital to attend the annual National Prayer Breakfast with Obama but they were not able to talk.

Kenney earlier told a radio interview that Obama is not avoiding President Arroyo.

She said she would not be surprised if there will be a high-level visit to Washington this year.

Lawmakers, on the other hand, urged President Arroyo to be wary of being used by the US in pursuing its interest in the region when she makes the visit.

Sen. Francis Pangilinan said the government must bear in mind that US interest in the Philippines is linked primarily to their concern about the growing economic and political strength of China.

"We must be careful not to be used as an unwitting pawn



Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo

in the struggle between two giants," Pangilinan said.

Pangilinan said President Arroyo should ensure that the country's interest would be primordial in the meeting with Obama.

Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, for his part, expressed optimism that the meeting would be for the good of the country but not necessarily for President Arroyo.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II said the US concerns over the Philippines is confined to security issues and combating terrorism, noting the recent visit of US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief Leon Panetta in the country.

Roxas said the Philippines should not allow itself to be used as a "staging point" by the US government in any of its defense positioning in Southeast Asian region.

Sen. Loren Legarda said it is about time that President Arroyo and Obama should meet to discuss pressing issues.

"It has been long in coming. They should walk their talk and rethink developments. US should help in every way possible to countries vulnerable to climate change impacts," she said.

Sen. Alan Peter Cayetano, on the other hand, advised President Arroyo to push for the Philippine government's interests rather than seeking support from the US to allow her to stay

in power.

Cayetano said President Arroyo should push for supporting the rights of Filipino veterans and find ways to help Filipinos working in the US who are greatly affected by the financial crisis.

"It's always good news when a Filipino President is given time and opportunity to push for a Philippine agenda. We hope the President would do just this to push for veteran's rights and compensation," he said.

DFA officials said President Arroyo is expected to thank Obama and the US Congress for passing the Veterans bill.

"It (the meeting) is an opportunity for President Arroyo to thank the US Congress for the passage of the Veterans bill and discuss with them possible legislative agenda that will promote Philippine interest," a DFA official said.

The Stimulus Bill also known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, recognizes the military service of Filipino World War II veterans and grants a lump sum of \$15,000 for US-based veterans and \$9,000 for those living in the Philippines.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo admitted that the bill on the benefits of Filipino World War II veterans was in danger of being dropped because of the financial crisis and new priorities of the US government.

Manila has remained a steadfast US ally in Southeast Asia, notably in Washington's efforts to root out extremists and terror cells.

In early June, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates vowed stepped-up support for the Philippines in its battle against homegrown Islamic militant groups linked to al-Qaeda.

The Philippines and United States are bound by a 1951 treaty that calls on each side to help the other in times of war.

US special forces advisers have trained and equipped their Philippine counterparts against Abu Sayyaf, a small gang of militants with links to al-Qaeda and blamed for the country's worst terrorist attacks. ■

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