

NOT EVEN 10,000?

Palace belittles anti-Charter change rally

by CHRISTIAN V. ESGUERRA
Inquirer.net

MALACAÑANG last June 11 belittled the crowd of thousands who turned up for the protest action held in Makati City last June 10 against the constituent assembly resolution passed at the House of Representatives to amend the Constitution.

"This is something that we do not gloat over. The number of protesters did not reach 10,000," Gabriel Claudio, presidential political adviser, said.

Police estimated that the crowd peaked at 8,000 and declined to around 5,000 until dispersal, while rally organizers claimed they peaked at 13,000 up to 15,000.



As darkness descends upon the intersection of Ayala Avenue and Paseo de Roxas, the massive gathering of protesters from all walks begin to disperse into the shadows of their fears. The people had come to protest the imminence of Charter change. As they had come peacefully, so did they leave. But for a while there, the central business district in Makati stood still.

Photo by Edwin Bacasmas

Various opposition groups vowed to mount more protest actions if President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her allies would continue to press for a constituent assembly, even without the Senate's consent.

The opposition said Arroyo and her allies would amend the Constitution and set up a parliamentary government under which Arroyo could vie for the post of prime minister.

The protest actions have the blessing of the influential Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, and the support of business groups, civil society organizations, left-leaning parties and the dominant political opposition groups.

Other protest actions were held in other parts of the country. ■

Arroyo, lawmakers to meet on govt agenda

by LIRA DALANGIN-FERNANDEZ
Inquirer.net

PRESIDENT Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo will gather members of her Cabinet and leaders of Congress to map out priority legislation, which could include new tax measures, when sessions resume next month.

The Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (Ledac) meeting is scheduled at 10:30am in Malacanang.

Speaker Prospero Nograles said the agenda of the meeting would focus on the economy and how to shore up revenues, including "what taxes can be or can't be legislated when session opens."

Asked if these tax measures include the taxes on tobacco and alcohol products and the 5-centavos fee on text and calls that are both pending in the House of Representatives, Nograles said both measures might be discussed.

"We are there to listen to Palace and finance managers' proposals," he added.

Nograles said the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program bill that would extend the program for five years and give it P150 billion in funding will be ratified when session resumes on July 27.

The reconciled version of the CARP bill was approved in a bicameral conference meeting on the night of June 9. ■

Back off, senators tell Palace, House

by AUREA CALICA & JOSE RODEL CLAPANO
Philstar.com

AMID the din of an anti-government rally at the country's premier commercial district in Makati City last June 10, senators told Malacañang and its House allies to back off from moves to rewrite the Constitution or risk endangering the country's political and economic stability.

The senators were among the thousands who gathered at the Ayala Avenue-Paseo de Roxas corner in Makati City to denounce the passage by the House of Representatives of Resolution 1109 that allows the convening of a constituent assembly without the participation of the Senate, in preparation for Charter change.

Many are convinced Charter change (Cha-cha) is meant to extend the terms of President Arroyo and her political allies. Organizers said the number of people who attended the rally peaked at 15,000.

"To avert further political and social conflict, it's now up to Mrs. Arroyo to disown and condemn HR 1109 herself, and order her allies in Congress to back down and back off," Sen. Pia Cayetano said.

The senators who joined the rally, aside from Cayetano, were Panfilo Lacson, Loren Legarda, Manuel Roxas II, Benigno Aquino III and Rodolfo Biazon. San Juan City Mayor JV Ejercito was also present.

Senators Francis Pangilinan and Francis Escudero issued separate statements, saying the protests were loud and clear enough to be heard by the Palace and the House.

"Malacañang's spokespersons have taken turns in defending the President, insisting that Mrs. Arroyo had no knowledge or blessing of the plot to force con-ass in the House. And yet she has not done anything to rein in her allies in Congress from pursuing their political adventurism," Cayetano said.

Cayetano also called on the Palace to stop its "scare tactics" and rebuffed financial managers' warning of the protest rally's economic repercussion.

"In their desperation to defuse overwhelming public opposition, the Arroyo regime routinely spins intrigues, like violence erupting in the rallies, or about the supposed negative consequences of these protests on the economy," Cayetano said.

"The massive rally at Makati, attended by people from all sectors of society, from the rich to the poor, is a compelling signal to the administration and its allies that our people are resolutely and overwhelmingly against an exercise to amend the Constitution at this time," Legarda said.

Escudero, for his part, said the government's response to protests against Cha-cha seemed intended to divert the people's attention from rising joblessness, chronic hunger and a decrepit public school system.

"This government would rather spend scarce resources by deploying thousands of policemen and soldiers to protect itself from the people's anger instead of hiring more nurses and doctors for our overly stretched public health

care network now faced with an imminent A(H1N1) outbreak," Escudero said.

"It is unfortunate that a number of those close to the President, who have been in power too long, have become arrogant and reckless and have no second thoughts about abusing these powers by way of pushing for an illegal Cha-cha," Pangilinan said.

Pangilinan warned Malacañang and its allies of the consequences of their actions. "Even the most well entrenched politicians do not stand a chance when faced with the wrath of a united and enraged people. If they will not listen to the people, they might end up losers in history," he said.

"Demonstrations against Charter change are valid, democratic exercises but it must also lead us to a more sober and dispassionate discussion of all the issues involved," Gordon said.

"We believe that the Supreme Court will not allow House Resolution 1109 to be implemented and thereafter, the discussion on Charter change can be pursued without duress or haste," he added.

"This move to change the Constitution is intended to prolong the hold on power of GMA. So we must not allow this anomalous con-ass of Congress. The lower House does not move without an order from Malacañang," Roxas said.

Roxas distributed garlic as well as packs of the popular corn and garlic snack called "Boy Bawang" during the rally. ■

Dengue deadlier than H1N1—DOH

by SHEILA CRISOSTOMO
Philstar.com

THE Department of Health (DOH) said last June 11 more people are dying from dengue but this seems to pass unnoticed amid the Influenza A(H1N1) scare.

Dr. Eric Tayag, director of the National Epidemiology Center of the DOH, pointed out in a news briefing at Malacañang that dengue has claimed the lives of 62 people, mostly young children, from January to May 9 while there are no reported fatalities so far from the flu caused by the A(H1N1) virus.

As of yesterday, 20 new cases of the A(H1N1) viral infection had been confirmed by the DOH, raising to 77 the total number of confirmed cases in the country.

Tayag said there is no dengue epidemic yet but there are reports of "clustering" of cases in Caloocan City.

The global case fatality rate for A(H1N1) is 0.55 percent of the 25,288 confirmed cases in 73 reporting countries.

The DOH is closely monitoring 60 barangays in Cavite, Ilocos Sur; Marikina, Bulacan; Lucena City in Quezon; Taytay, Rizal; Bacolod City and Silay City in Negros Occidental; Cebu City, Danao City, Minglanilla and Lapu-lapu City in Cebu; Tacloban City in Leyte; Valencia City in Bukidnon; in Cagayan de Oro City in Misamis Oriental; Davao City and Davao del Sur; Island City Samar and Davao del Norte and Palomok and Tupi in South Cotabato.

DOH Secretary Francisco Duque III said this year's cases is 57.9 percent lower compared to the same period in 2008 but this should not lead the public into complacency.

DOH officials in Central Luzon said that dengue fever remains a more serious threat to local folk than A(H1N1).

Dr. Irene Canlas, head of the DOH's regional epidemiology department, confirmed that since January, five have already died from dengue in the region.

"In terms of mortality, dengue is definitely more dangerous than A(H1N1). We have to be alert because the rainy season has set in," Canlas said.

Spreading like fire
But the continued rise in the number of A(H1N1) cases has placed concerned agencies in the spotlight and various academic institutions scampering in different directions to protect their students. Classes in several schools were either suspend-

ed or postponed to a later date as a precautionary measure.

However, despite of the ballooning figure, DOH Undersecretary Mario Villaverde said there is still no outbreak of the virus in the Philippines. "There's no outbreak because we can still trace cases. We can still find the index case and their contacts."

DOH records showed that "some of these cases were related to the cluster of schools that have already voluntarily suspended their classes due to the novel virus."

These schools are De La Salle University (DLSU)-Taft with a total of 15 cases; DLSU-St. Benilde College with two cases; Ateneo de Manila High School with three cases; St. Andrew School in Parañaque with one case and FEU-East Avenue College with two cases.

Four of the cases are foreigners but the DOH refused to give their profile as it starts to deviate from profile-based reporting.

Records show that seven of the cases have history of travel in A(H1N1)-affected countries. The ages of the 20 new cases ranged from eight to 49 years and 18 of them are males.

"The increase in cases was due to the relentless contact tracing done by the DOH in the five affected schools. All cases are responding well to treatment," DOH undersecretary Villaverde said.

The DOH had already tracked down the source of the virus in the five schools and this shows that "there is still no community transmission yet."

Records also revealed that 23 previously hospitalized patients have already tested negative for the virus and were sent home.

But the DOH does not recommend suspension of classes every time a school will have a confirmed case of A(H1N1).

He said for the "index" or the first case, a school could suspend classes. But for the succeeding cases, the affected students could just be sent home to observe a 10-day quarantine period.

The official maintained that the virus is very mild and some cases began recovering even before they were put on medication.

"Response level system"
But as far as Education Secretary Jesli Lapus is concerned, public and private school administrators are empowered to suspend classes in view of the "response level system" that has been enforced since June 1. ■

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