

Imelda Marcos at 80: Penniless with diamond ring

by HRVOJE HRANJSKI
AP Writer

IMELDA Marcos is nothing if not a survivor. As the Philippines' most notorious first lady approaches 80, she is still courting publicity and claiming that despite the billions reportedly stashed away during her late husband Ferdinand's rule, and the 22-carat diamond ring on her finger, she is nearly broke.

"Here I am, at 80, still struggling to look presentable," the former beauty queen said as she greeted reporters this weekend in her swank two-story Manila penthouse, wearing a dark red dress over matching pants and red slippers.

Imelda, whose birthday is July 2, will forever be remembered for the dazzling jewels and 1,220 pairs of shoes she left behind in the presidential palace after the "people's power" revolt that toppled Marcos's authoritarian regime in 1986 and forced them into exile in Hawaii. She said the diamond ring was given to her by Ferdinand 55 years ago on their engagement.

Ferdinand died in 1989 and Imelda was allowed to return home in 1991. Despite her notoriety for extravagance in a nation wracked by poverty, she still has her supporters and even won a congressional seat in 1995. She ran, unsuccessfully, for president in 1992.

These days she keeps busy working on her own jewelry collection, making the pieces from her old accessories and clothes, mixed with newly bought stones and other materials.

Some Filipinos were incensed at her unashamed opulence, but others, especially the generation born after 1986 with no memory of martial law under the Marcos regime, view her as an entertaining curiosity.

"She's captivating and mesmerizing, whether or not you share her politics," said architect Gigi Gonzalez.

Despite some 900 civil and criminal cases she had faced in Philippine courts since 1991—cases ranging from embezzlement and corruption to tax evasion—she has emerged relatively unscathed and

never served prison time. All but a handful of the cases have been dismissed for lack of evidence and a few convictions were overturned on appeal.

But she still does not weary of complaining of her lot. Imelda, her hair coifed and cheeks rouged, teared up as she complained she had to withdraw money from her husband's meager war pension to post bail so she could travel to Singapore earlier this month for an eye checkup paid for by her children.

"I was first lady for only 20 years. All the beautiful things I gave to the Philippines, am I being persecuted for that? I didn't know you can inherit a crime from your husband."

Her husband and his cronies allegedly amassed ill-gotten wealth estimated at \$5 billion to \$10 billion during Marcos' 20 years in power, but the Presidential Commission on Good Government, created to recover the Marcos billions, says the government has only found cash and assets totaling \$1.63 billion.

The assets include three separate sets of diamond tiaras, ruby brooches, emerald necklaces and other jewels.

She remains unashamed of her past, when she shopped in the world's richest boutiques and launched lavish beautification projects at home in the midst of the Philippines' extreme poverty.

"Filipinos are brainwashed to be beautiful. We're allergic to ugliness," she said by way of explanation.

To Imelda's horror, the government of former President Corazon Aquino—the Marcos nemesis who restored democracy after leading the 1986 revolt—auctioned off some of the jewelry collection but the proceeds were less than expected.

The government is planning to sell the remaining jewels, estimated at about \$300 million—including a diamond-ringed 150.01-carat ruby pendant bigger than a thumb. But Marcos wants them back, not for herself but to be kept as a national treasure, she said.



Outgoing Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez indicated last week the sequestered jewels should be returned if there is no evidence they are part of ill-gotten Marcos wealth. However, his replacement shot down the idea, saying they will remain in the central bank vault until all cases against Marcos are resolved.

Imelda is keen to keep defending the family name.

The Marcos legacy, as she sees it, adorns her apartment walls. There are photographs of the Marcoses with world leaders of the 20th century, among them former US President Ronald Reagan and China's Mao Zedong—pictured kissing Imelda on the hand during a visit to Beijing.

In her apartment—a temporary residence while her house is renovated—court documents were neatly arranged on tables in the living room, including from a 1990 New York jury ruling that acquitted her of embezzling \$140 million from the Philippine treasury, which she saw as a vindication.

"I won on my birthday," Marcos said. "I was alone, widowed, helpless, penniless, countryless. But even the Bible says there is a special place in hell for those who oppress widows and orphans." ■

Court 'moving ball' on racial hiring, Obama says

by JENNIDER LOVEN
AP Writer

WASHINGTON—President Barack Obama said Thursday, July 2 the Supreme Court was "moving the ball" on affirmative action in this week's decision favoring white firefighters in New Haven, Conn., but he added that the court had not ruled out the use of racial preferences in the future.

In a White House interview the president also said, "I don't think that hiring on the basis of race ... alone is constitutionally possible." Obama, a former teacher of constitutional law, said, "I've always believe that affirmative action was less of an issue or should be less of an issue than it has been made out to be in news reports."

Scheduled to depart next week on a trip to Russia, Italy and Ghana, Obama praised Moscow for its cooperation in attempting to persuade North Korea and Iran to abandon their nuclear development programs. The United Nations recently approved "the most robust sanction regime that we've ever seen with respect to North Korea," he said.

The president said his agenda in Russia includes talks on a new treaty to curtail long-range nuclear missiles. Asked why he intends to meet with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the former president, Obama said he "still has a lot of sway." Putin now is nominally the second-in-command in the Kremlin.

Chiding the former president, he said Putin "has one foot in the old ways of doing business and



Obama said. The president has pledged to close the prison in Cuba and hopes to send most of those currently held there to other countries.

With joblessness rising, the president said he was "deeply concerned" about unemployment

and conceded that too many families are worried about "whether they will be next." Still, he said that since he took office almost six months ago "we have successfully stabilized the financial markets," and "started to see some stabilization on housing." ■

Fil-Ams urged to register for 2010 RP polls

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In San Francisco, California, the US Federation of Philippine American Chambers of Commerce is reminding Filipinos and FilAms with dual citizenship to register before the deadline.

Yolanda Stern, federation president emeritus and convenor and champion of the theh Citizenship Reacquisition Act and the Overseas Absentee Voting Act, said voters today can truly vote in absentia.

Here are some important reminders on OAV registration:

- Those with dual citizenship may register using their Philippine passport and the certified order of approval or oath of allegiance.
- For those who immigrated to the US prior to the 1991 Immigration Reform Act and became

a naturalized US citizen, they can reacquire their Philippine citizenship by applying for a Philippine passport to be a dual citizen.

- If they came to the US as a visitor and overstayed, they are still Filipino citizens, and can renew their passport and register to vote.

Only the following are disqualified from registering: Those who lost their Filipino citizenship and did not reacquire it, those who have a criminal conviction punishable by imprisonment of not less than a year, and those legally declared insane or incompetent of mind.

More information on OAV registration is available at the Commission on Elections website on OAV registration and continuing registration. (*Inquirer.net*)

UST Singers bags top prizes in California choral tilt

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group sang Ayug Ti Amianan, Waray-Waray, and Tirindingding, all arranged by Prof. Fidel G. Calalang, Jr. also bagged the first prize. For this category, the Cuesta College Chamber Singers from the United States and the St. Zlata Meglenska all-female choir from Macedonia garnered the second and third prizes respectively.

During the three-day long choral competitions, the public was given the chance to vote for their favorite choir and the People's Choice Award was accorded to the UST Singers.

The competition was adjudicated by three distinguished judges in the choral world namely, Dr. Ginger Covert Colla, Professor William Hatcher, and Professor Christian Grube.

The UST Singers who are on a concert tour of the United States and the Pacific left Manila last May and will be going back to the Philippines in July after their scheduled performances in San Francisco, San Jose, and Ontario in California.

Under the tutelage of Prof. Fidel G. Calalang, Jr., the choir is composed of students and alumni representing the different colleges and faculties of the Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas. The group was formed in 1992 and in its 17 years of existence, the ensemble has achieved more than 45 top prizes in prestigious international choral competitions in the United Kingdom, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Czech Republic, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland. (*Peter C. Carillo*)

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