

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

Senate asks Arroyo to scrap, renegotiate VFA

by **MICHAEL LIM UBAC**
Inquirer.net

THE Senate last Sept. 23 adopted on second reading Senate Resolution No. 1356 calling on President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to send notice to US President Barack Obama to renegotiate or terminate the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).

With no one objecting, the Senate made the move after Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago said the agreement had been weighed and found not only in violation of the Philippine Constitution but also "void for vagueness" and "a failure."

Santiago, chair of the Legislative Oversight Committee on the VFA (Lovfa), delivered a strongly worded speech asking the Senate to formally seek the renegotiation, if not outright termination, of the 10-year-old agreement

that governs the treatment of American troops engaged in joint military exercises in the Philippines.

The Senate concurred with the Lovfa recommendations before adjourning.

Santiago said in her speech that while the United States called the Philippines "a major non-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) ally," it "treats us like a shabby country cousin."

"In return for the VFA, what we receive is paltry, mostly in the form of excess defense articles—in other words, US military junk," said Santiago who was ironically among the 18 senators who voted in favor of the agreement in 1999.

Fatal flaw
"The fatal flaw of the VFA is the failure to specify the period of stay of visiting forces, and the failure to define what are the

'activities' that they can engage in while in Philippine national territory," said Santiago, who chairs the Senate committees on foreign relations and on economic affairs.

She noted that the US government did not consider the VFA a treaty, but a mere executive agreement.

"The VFA is void for vagueness, because it fails to define the crucial terms 'visit,' 'temporary' and 'activities,'" she said.

The "Resolution expressing the sense of the Senate that the DFA (Department of Foreign Affairs) should seek to renegotiate the VFA with the US, and in case of denial, should give notice of termination of the VFA" was written by Santiago and signed by Senators Joker Arroyo, Panfilo Lacson and Francis Pangilinan. It is contained in Committee Report No. 1356, which was approved

by the Lovfa on Sept. 14.

Senators Rodolfo Biazon, Gregorio Honasan and Richard Gordon, also members of the committee, signed the resolution but with reservations.

Lets US troops stay indefinitely

Santiago said that in effect, the VFA allowed US troops to stay indefinitely and opened the way to their engaging in other forms of military activities, even combat operations, "short of establishing a permanent [US] military base."

She cited an article written in 2004 by US Col. David Maxwell, commander of the Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines (JSOTFP), who said: "The [Philippine] Constitution does not prohibit combat operations and provides an exception to this if there is a treaty in force, and a treaty has been in force between the two countries since 1951."

"We have tried the VFA for 10 years and found it wanting," Santiago said, pointing out that "the power to determine the life expectancy" of the agreement belonged, not to the Senate, but to the Philippine President.

"Therefore, at the very least, this Senate should ask the executive branch of government either to renegotiate or to terminate the VFA," she said.

Illusory benefits

The VFA is "a failure," Santiago said, "because after 10 years, the [Armed Forces] has not modernized sufficiently to keep up with our Asian neighbors, and the terrorist groups are still active."

She said the supposed financial and other benefits of the agreement were "illusory" because the Philippines was not even among the top 10 recipients of US military aid.

In 2004, three years after the 9/11 terror attacks, the US-based Center for Public Integrity listed the top 10 military aid recipients

of the United States as: Israel (\$9 billion), Egypt (\$6 billion), Pakistan (\$4.6 billion), Jordan (\$2.6 billion), Afghanistan (\$2.6 billion), Colombia (\$2 billion), Turkey (\$1 billion), Peru (\$445.8 million), Bolivia (\$320.6 million) and Poland (\$313 million).

In contrast, Malacañang said the Philippines received the following financial aid from Washington: foreign military financing since 1999 (\$250 million), foreign military sales 2001-2007 (\$76.5 million) and excess defense articles 1999-2007 (\$76.7 million).

Santiago said that despite years of American military aid, the Philippine military remained "the most poorly equipped in Asia."

"Paano, akala natin bibigyan tayo ng Amerikano ng pampag-ara. Yun pala, ukay-ukay ang inabot natin (We thought the Americans would give us top-of-the-line military equipment. What happened was we got only used stuff)," she said. ■

PNP sees peaceful 2010 polls due to automation

by **MIKE FRIALDE**
Philstar.com

THE Philippine National Police (PNP) sees the conduct of peaceful elections next year because of full automation.

"There will be less movement because of automation. There will be less chances of violent incidents," PNP chief Director General Jesus Versoza said.

He said measures are in place to protect cell sites that will be used in the transmission of election results from the polling precincts.

Meanwhile, Versoza said the PNP has yet to identify areas considered as election hotspots.

"There are no election hotspots yet. We are just looking at areas of immediate concern based on the past two elections," he said.

At least 10 provinces have been tagged by the PNP as "areas of immediate concern," such as Abra, Basilan, Sulu, Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Masbate, Nueva Ecija, Samar and Maguindanao.

Versoza said the PNP is currently updating its list of provinces considered as "areas of immediate concern."

He said the updated list will be submitted to the Commission on Elections (Comelec).

"We may add or limit the areas of concern," he said.

Versoza also said the PNP has not yet identified private armed groups which could be a source of violence in the May elections.

Earlier, PNP spokesman Sr. Supt. Leonardo Espina told reporters that election hotspots would only be known on the last day of filing of certificates of candidacy.

At the moment, the national police is only dealing with "probabilities," Espina noted.

"The identification of election hotspots involves the consideration of several factors including the candidates who will be running, the intensity of political rivalry and even dissidence," said Espina, adding that the PNP would be able to create its basis for the identification of election hotspots by December.

According to the PNP, there are several factors to be considered in declaring an area an election hotspot, like the history of poll-related violent incidents in past elections; the existence of intense political rivalry between contending parties; the possible employment of partisan armed groups by candidates in the area; and the presence of domestic threat groups. ■

Ramos gives Teodoro 'thumbs up'

by **JOCELYN UY**
Inquirer.net

FORMER President Fidel Ramos gave presidential aspirant Gilbert Teodoro his trademark "thumbs up" sign last Sept. 21, saying the defense secretary was "very very competent" to become the country's next president.

But Ramos fell short of declaring his support for the administration standard-bearer. He said it was still too early to make any pronouncement on which presidential aspirant he would support in 2010.

In a farewell dinner hosted by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Foundation for its outgoing country director Klaus Preschle in Makati City, Ramos told reporters that he was reserving Nov. 15, two weeks before the filing of candidacy, to announce his official choice of presidential candidate.

By that time, he said, the election lineups shall have been fixed and rid of those bound to "self-destruct."

'Very qualified'

"On Nov. 15, I will tell you the answer because some of them will self-destruct. Somebody already did, right?" Ramos said, apparently alluding to Sen. Man-

uel "Mar" Roxas II, who settled for the No. 2 post to give way to Sen. Benigno Aquino III in the Liberal Party.

When asked what he thought of the consensus reached by the Lakas-Kampi-CMD national executive committee to pick Teodoro as its standard-bearer, Ramos only gave the "thumbs up" sign and succinctly said, "he is very qualified."

But he shied from saying if Teodoro had his support of how he would fare against survey front runners Aquino and Sen. Manuel Villar.

"It is too early to tell. What I am focused about is the future, not the short-term. Things could still change. I am not siding with anyone yet except the Republic of the Philippines," Ramos said.

Ramos was not among those pleased with the merger on May 28 of the Lakas-CMD, which he founded with Pangasinan Rep. Jose de Venecia, and the Kampi (Kabalikatan ng Malayang Pilipino).

He had earlier said the merger was not final. But he had also assured officials of the merged parties that he would not interfere with De Venecia's bid to block the accreditation of the administration coalition with the Com-

mission on Elections.

But earlier in the evening during a 17-minute speech he delivered at the dinner party, Ramos gave Teodoro, one of the guests sharing his table, unsolicited advice to follow the "German style" of uniting a divided government.

He said Germany's winning and losing parties were fused to create a new government in 2005, with Christian Democrat Union leader Angela Merkel as the chancellor.

"They created a government of national unity putting the ruling coalition and the loyal opposition together and now they become the number three economy in the world, bar none," he said.

"I hope our present leaders, the ones we elected to lead as, as well as all of the presidential candidates, including Mr. No. 1 over there (referring to Teodoro) see our respective roles in nation-building."

Teodoro, in a speech earlier in the evening, brandished a cardboard bearing the number "1," which he said was the aspiration of all those present at the dinner party.

Ramos handed over to Teodoro the cardboard, which was their table number, before he went to the stage to speak. ■

Romulo won't quit; Gibo says no need for loyalty check

DEFENSE secretary and administration presidential bet Gilbert Teodoro said there is no need for a loyalty check among Cabinet members despite Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo's declaration of support for opposition Liberal Party standard bearer Sen. Benigno Aquino III.

"In my opinion, it's best to lay down our cards. But in terms of loyalty check, what good would it bring? *Parang nagsosona ka nayan at hindi naman magandang yan* (It's like persecution and it's not good anymore)," Teodoro said.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said there are no "traitors" in the Cabinet even as he also ruled out a loyalty check.

"I don't think there'll be such, as you said, traitors. Our Cabinet members are decent," Ermita told a news briefing. "I'm sure they won't be able to sleep if they have that sinister design. I don't believe anybody will put himself in such a position and the decent thing to do is for him to approach the President and say why he thinks he should already resign from his post," he said.

"I hope they understand the implications of their actions," Er-

mita added.

Teodoro said the country's next leader should be a "healing president."

"That's his personal decision and I respect that," Teodoro said referring to Romulo.

Romulo, who had also served under the Aquino administration as budget chief, said his "long years of association with Tita Cory and the Aquino family was the basis" of his support for the presidential bid of the only son of the late president and the martyred Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr. Sen. Manuel Roxas II is Aquino's running mate.

Lakas Kampi leaders earlier chose Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronald Puno as the party's vice presidential candidate, although they claimed the decision was not yet final.

There are 10 Arroyo Cabinet members who had served under the Aquino administration.

Romulo rejected calls for him to resign and said he is "standing by the President until the end of her term and beyond."

"I have to make it very clear that such comments do not in any way diminish my service and support for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Neither does

it mean that I am moving to the opposition," Romulo said in a statement.

At the farewell dinner last Sept. 22 for the Konrad Adenauer country director at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Makati City, Teodoro said he felt no rancor about Romulo's decision.

"I don't bear ill-feelings towards any body but the Abu Sayyaf and the rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front," Teodoro said.

"If that is his stand, I respect that. I don't want to go personal about it," he said.

"I have been in politics and I don't get mad. Instead I learned how to deal with the situation," he said.

"Different perspectives, that's politics, and in politics many things can happen and there are many things that should be accepted with an open mind. You have to deal with it rather than feel bad about it."

He also said he is optimistic that Romulo's pronouncement will not have severe repercussions on his political plans, adding that more political realignments will take place before the filing of certificates of candidacy. (*Philstar.com*)

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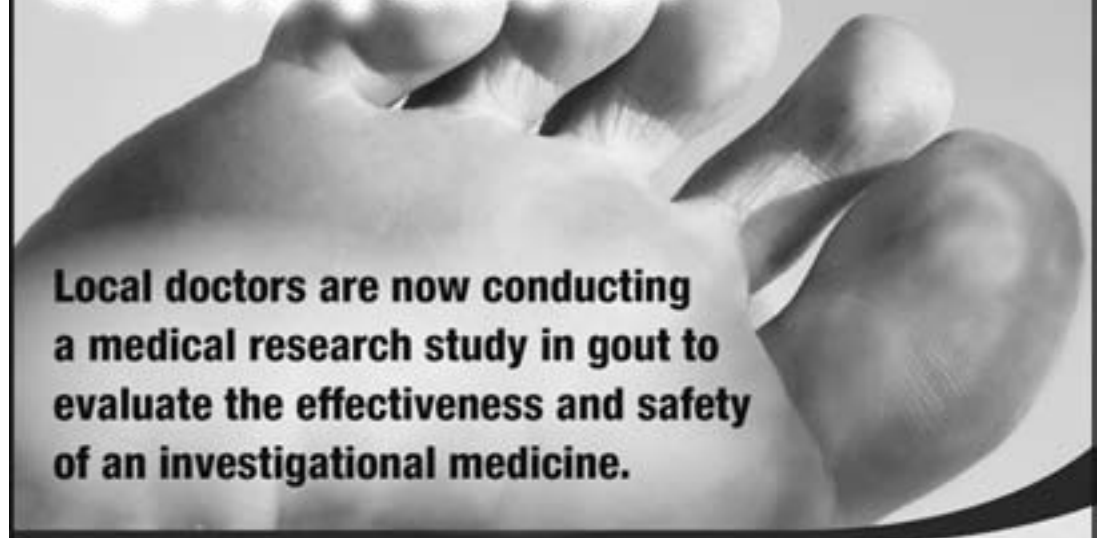
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