

Ombudsman told: Resign or be humiliated

by LIRA DALAGIN-FERNANDEZ
Inquirer.net



Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez

THE lead endorser of the impeachment complaint against Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez in the House of Representatives last April 13 reiterated her call on the embattled official to quit her post to spare herself from the "humiliating" impeachment process.

"Resign now or face a humiliating impeachment," Akbayan party list Representative Risa Hontiveros told Gutierrez.

In a news conference, Hontiveros said all evidence against the Ombudsman are ready and strong enough to impeach her.

"The complaint is air-tight, the evidence solid, and her competence would be given full scrutiny. If she still has a sense of delicadeza (sense of decency), a resignation would at least be a graceful exit," the congresswoman said.

The complaint has been referred to the House rules committee. Committee chairman Arthur Defensor is expected to refer it to the justice committee within the week.

The justice committee will schedule hearings to determine if the complaint is sufficient in

form and in substance.

Gutierrez has been accused of betrayal of public trust and culpable violation of the Constitution in the complaint filed on March 2 by 31 individuals from civil society groups and former government officials, led by former Senate President Jovito Salonga.

Hontiveros called on her colleagues with pending cases with the Ombudsman to inhibit from the proceeding.

Cavite Representative Elpidio Barzaga earlier volunteered to keep out of the proceedings because of his pending graft cases before the Ombudsman.

The complaint has been endorsed by Hontiveros and five other party-list representatives.

Hontiveros said a member of the majority bloc and three others from the minority have also vowed to endorse it. ■

Economic bills among Senate priorities

by CHRISTINA MENDEZ
Philstar.com

SENATORS are prioritizing economic bills and those seeking to amend the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and the Energy Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA) when Congress resumed session last April 13.

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri said these bills are still in the committee level awaiting final committee reports.

"We will also prioritize economic bills that will stimulate the economy and those which will provide social safety nets to our people amid the global economic crisis," he said.

Zubiri said the Senate is also awaiting the bicameral reports on bills seeking to amend the Pag-IBIG charter, the Real Estate Investment Companies Act, and the Mt. Banahaw and Mt. Cristobal Protected Areas Act.

"We would like to finish as many bills as possible in the seven weeks of session and before Congress goes on sine die adjournment on June 5," he said.

"I expect that when the 3rd regular session opens on July 27 it would be election fever already and legislators focus will be diverted to the 2010 elections."

Other economic bills pending in Congress:

- The condonation of delin-

quent contributions to SSS,

- The simplified net income system,
- The Paglaum Fund for the rehabilitation of Panay island from the ravages of typhoon "Frank," and
- The Mechanization of Agricultural Sector.

The following bills have been tackled in the plenary before Congress went on Lenten recess:

- Crimes Against International Humanitarian Law; and
- Picture-based Warnings on Tobacco Products.

Tax exemption

Sen. Francis Escudero insists that the law exempts minimum wage earners from income tax for salaries earned during the whole of 2008.

In debunking the government's claim the tax exemption covers only half of last year, Escudero said Republic Act 9504 is a piece of social legislation aimed at alleviating the plight of the poor in these times of economic hardship.

"A contrary interpretation defeats the spirit behind the enactment of this law," he said.

Escudero, who sponsored the bill that became RA 9504 as chairman of the Senate ways and means committee, said it was particularly designed to aid

Filipinos from the low income group, particularly laborers.

"Their already meager salary and wage should now be exempted from income taxation for the whole of 2008 as it was Congress's intention that the law be made retroactive starting January 1, 2008," he said.

Escudero said when RA 9504 took effect July 6 last year, it exempted minimum wage earners from paying tax on income earned during the calendar year 2008.

If the Bureau of Internal Revenue insists on its erroneous interpretation of the law, the Senate ways and means committee will be compelled to bring the issue before the proper court, he added.

RA 9504 also increased the personal exemption for individuals as follows:

- Single—from P20,000 to P50,000;
- Head of family—from P25,000 to P50,000;
- Each married individual—from P32,000 to P50,000; and
- Each qualified dependent (not exceeding four)—from P8,000 to P25,000.

Anti-trust law

Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago has proposed an anti-trust law to penalize unfair trade and anti-competitive practices to improve consumer welfare and fos-



Senator Miguel Zubiri

ter sound business ethics.

In a statement, Santiago, Senate committee on economic affairs chairwoman, said laws are inadequate to stop anti-competitive practices and behavior in the market.

"Despite the large number of laws, competition has not been fully established nor enhanced in all sectors of the economy," she said.

"These laws have been hardly used or implemented as may be seen in the lack of cases litigated in court."

Santiago's bill seeks to prevent undertakings, corporations and businesses from distorting competition in the marketplace.

It aims to sanction cartels, the abuse of market power by monopolies, and the unfair competition brought about by a merger, acquisition, or concentration of enterprises. ■

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OK seen for bills raising House seats to 350

by GIL C. CABACUNGAN JR.
Inquirer.net

THERE is enough time to pass two congressional measures that will raise the number of House seats from 250 to 350 and have the new congressmen elected by May 2010, Iloilo Representative Raul T. Gonzalez, Jr. said.

The House of Representatives has been set to rush the passage of House Bill No. 5943, which he authored, while the upper chamber could do the same with Senate Bill No. 3123 authored by Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile, Gonzalez said last April 12.

Both Gonzalez and Enrile have said the 250-member limit in the House set in Section 5, Article VI, of the Constitution has become irrelevant after the Philippines'



population breached the 90-million mark in 2009 from 60 million 22 years ago.

A congressman should represent at least 250,000 people in a district. An example of under-representation is Cavite, which

experienced a population boom due to the industries that settled in the province, but it has only three congressmen representing three million residents.

"If a true people's representation in the affairs of state is to be

realized as constitutionally enshrined and mandated, a medium must be provided so that the ideal, or the nearest to the ideal, number of representatives of the people may be maintained," Gonzalez said.

Since the Constitution mandates that 20 percent of the House membership must be elected through a party-list system, Gonzalez said increasing the number of congressmen would also lead to greater sectoral representation in the House.

The measure, however, is meeting stiff opposition from legislators in both chambers concerned about the implications of a larger pork barrel (P70 million a year per district) with 100 new members and the further dilution of an opposition that continually failed to be a potent fiscalizer. ■

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