

Senators to probe road user's tax

by CHRISTINE AVENDAÑO
Inquirer.net

SEN. Miriam-Defensor Santiago wants the administration to account for billions of pesos in road user's tax, which she says is the "biggest pork barrel unaccounted for in the government." Claiming that there is "grand theft" involved, Santiago, chair of the committee on economic affairs, is set to call for a Senate probe next week of the road user's tax.

The senator said on dzBB radio Sunday that the tax had already generated P42 billion since 2001. The tax is collected from vehicle owners annually and is used for road maintenance and transport infrastructure.

Because no oversight committee in Congress looks into how authorities are spending the money, the revenue from the road user's tax is being spent frivolously, Santiago said.

Last year alone, tax collections reached almost P10 billion, but P8 billion could not be accounted for, according to Santiago.

The tax is being overseen by a road board, which has as mem-

bers certain Cabinet members, but executive directors are the ones determining how proceeds of the tax would be spent, the senator said.

COA demands

"These executive directors had not been heeding the repeated demands by the Commission on Audit for them not to touch the tax," Santiago said.

She said these officials had not accounted for how the proceeds were spent since 2001.

Santiago said she learned that these officials would give the proceeds to certain local governments they favored.

While there were guidelines on how the tax should be used, these were being "violated with impunity," she said.

Santiago said the road user's tax was bigger than the pork barrel of Congress or even that of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

The senator said she would ask authorities how they spent the tax since 2001.

"Imagine, if this money is stolen. That's billions every year," Santiago said on Nimfa Rogado-Ravelo's program on dzBB.

Vilma Santos: I won't run for higher office

by LIRA DALANGIN-FERNANDEZ
Inquirer.net

BATANGAS Governor Vilma Santos-Recto shunned reports of a possible tandem with Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro as vice presidential candidate of the administration party Lakas-Kampi-Christian Muslim Democrats (CMD).

"Wala po akong kausap (I've not talked to anyone) about that," Santos-Recto said in a text message.

Reports quoting presidential political adviser Gabriel Claudio described the Teodoro-Santos-Recto tandem as a "powerhouse combination" for the May 2010 presidential election.

The award-winning, actress, however, said she has no plans of running for higher office.

"My focus is Batangas," she said, adding that she intends to seek a second term as governor next year.

Teodoro was picked by the national executive committee of Lakas-Kampi-CMD in a meeting last week. The officials also chose Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno as Teodoro's running mate. The decision of the committee will be subject to ratification of the members in a national convention between October and November.

RP team 3rd in art 'Olympics'

by VINCENT CABREZA
Inquirer.net

BAGUIO CITY—Not bad for this team of artists whose pleas for funding went largely ignored by politicians and corporations, whose members spent an extra night at a South Korean airport for lack of hotel money, and who had one member briefly detained there for carrying a bloodstained knife.

That's just "chicken blood" from some previous home-cooked dish, the detainee said, before finally convincing authorities to let him go.

Despite this series of unfortunate events, the Philippine delegation to the 3rd Delphic Games held on the resort island of Jeju, South Korea, gave brilliant performances in what was considered the "Olympics" of the art world.

The 17-member team, mostly composed of Cordillera-based artists, placed third overall out of the 44 countries that competed in the games held on Sept. 9-15.

Ifugao woodcarver Ernesto Dulang, 60, bagged the gold medal in sculpture for transforming, under time pressure, a 150-cm block of wood into a human figure pouring water from a pot.

Winning the Lyra Award (a special prize given to collaborative works) was a group of Filipino puppeteers headed by EV Espiritu, who wowed the audience with a shadow play dealing with the environment.

The Delphic Games are all about "peace engendering competition of the arts," according to German founder J. Christian Kirsch, who drew inspiration from the original Greek competitions of 582 B.C.

The first games were held in December 2000 in Moscow with the participation of 27 countries. The second was held in September 2005 in Kuching, Malaysia, with 21 countries taking part.

The event serves as the artistic counterpart of the Olympic Games, said Divina Bautista, a Filipino co-founder based in Baguio.

Dulang was given three days to finish the sculpture and often had difficulty communicating with the Korean organizers whenever he requested equipment to speed up his work.

On the third day, Dulang recalled, the statue was still without a face, prompting him to ask the team's videographer Joel Arthur Tibaldo to be his face model.

House panel backpedals on tax on text

by LIRA DALANGIN-FERNANDEZ
Inquirer.net

AFTER approving the bill imposing a five-centavo excise tax on every text message, the ways and means committee of the House of Representatives backpedaled Tuesday when its chairman, Antique Representative Exequiel Javier, threw back to the panel the controversial measure.

At a hearing, Javier said he was reconsidering the bill because of the clamor of consumers group.

"There are clamor from some groups that you have heard. We

find it appropriate that we suspend the approval of the bill," Javier said in a separate interview at the sidelines of the hearing.

Javier stressed that the new tax would not be passed to consumers as stated in section 6 of the bill, which said that the telecommunications companies would shoulder it.

But Javier said this was not enough guarantee that the public would not be burdened by the new tax. He said the committee was planning to come up with a new scheme that for instance, would reduce the cost of each text message from P1 to 90 centavos, and allot the five centavos as excise tax.

"We just want to make sure that there is no pass-on to consumers. What we could do is reduce the cost of text message. We reduce it to be less than P1 to absorb the tax," he said.

Cagayan de Oro Representative Rufus Rodriguez made the motion to reconsider the bill, which was seconded by Akbayan partylist Representative Risa Hontiveros.

Bayan Muna partylist Representative Teodoro Casiño said it was very rare for a committee to reconsider a bill that has been passed.

Casiño said this could have been prompted by the strong pressure from the consumers and because the election year was approaching, Malacañang was "very sensitive" to these issues, he added.

Rodolfo Salalima, Globe Telecommunications' senior vice president for corporate affairs, said they could not be prevented from passing on to consumers the additional tax.

"Why single out the telcos? The general law of taxes is that all taxes, except income tax, are passable to the public," he told the panel.

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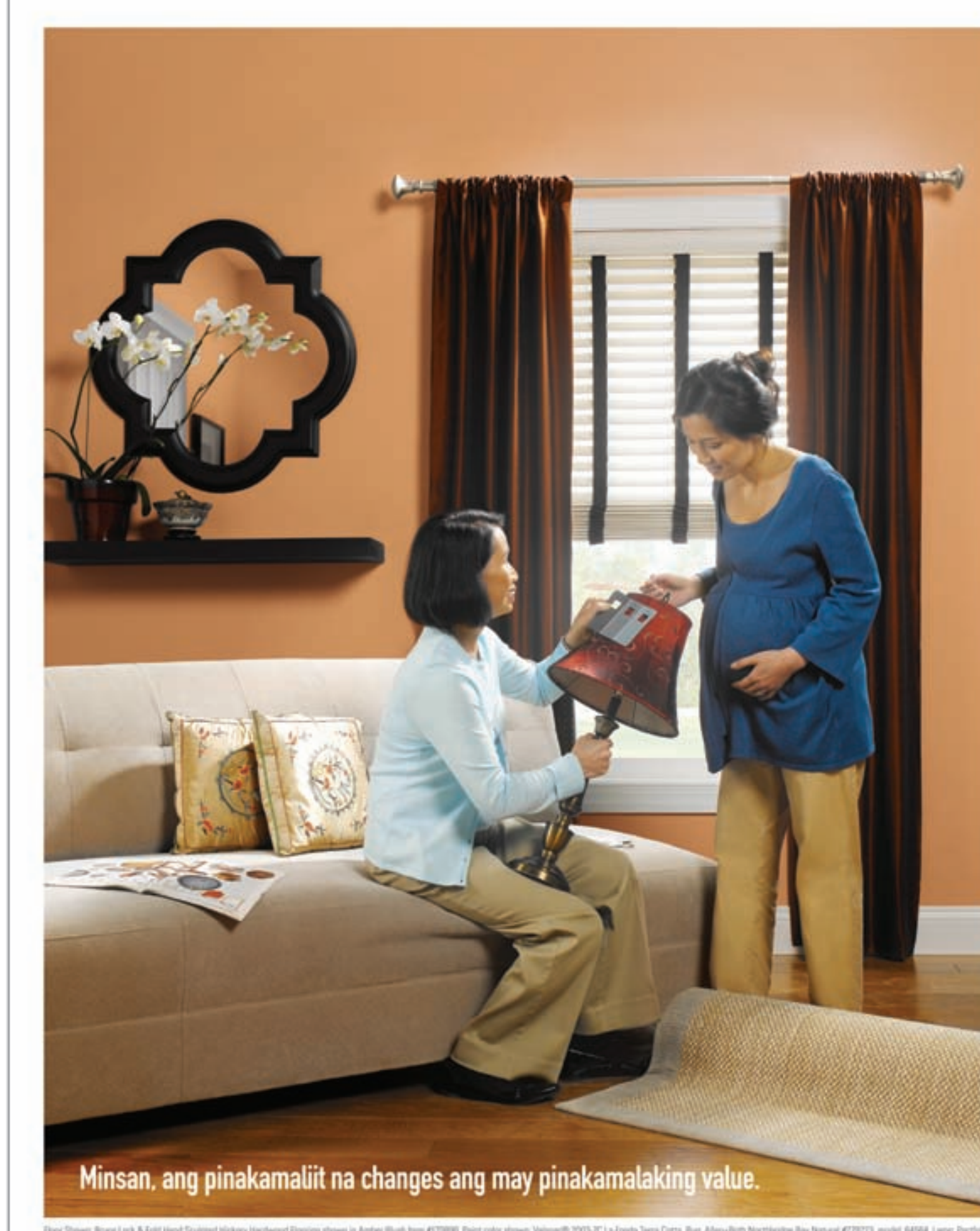
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