

Philippine president's agenda includes issues of concern to bishops

QUEZON CITY, Philippines - The agenda President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo announced for the second half of her term includes issues that some Philippine bishops have targeted as concerns.

In her State of the Nation address July 23, Arroyo told officials and guests that her administration will focus on fighting poverty and hunger and generating foreign investments.

"It is my wish that the Philippines be among the ranks of developed nations in 20 years," Arroyo said. "By then," she added, "poverty shall have been marginalized and the (formerly) marginalized raised to a robust middle class."

The president, whose term ends in 2010, said her administration will work to counter poverty and hunger through infrastructure and other projects focused in underdeveloped regions, such as Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Hours before Arroyo spoke, Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez of Marbel told the Asian church news agency UCA News that the government urgently must address the hunger problem.

Bishop Gutierrez, chairman of the Philippine bishops' social justice and peace commission, said Arroyo's administration "has done something" to address poverty, such as government-funded stores in communities that sell basic goods and rice at cost.

However, government programs must aspire to develop more permanent "food security," the bishop said. A survey of the Social Weather Stations, a private research group, estimated recently that nearly 15 percent of the country's families experience hunger.

Bishop Gutierrez said Congress also must prevent moves to open the country to foreign mining corporations, as well as create laws to stop extrajudicial killings and reform the electoral process. The human rights group Karapatan reported that, as of July 7, 885 people had been killed and 183 had been abducted since Arroyo became president in 2001.

Many victims belonged to leftist groups that accuse the state of resorting to killings and abductions to silence critics and suspected sympathizers of the Communist Party. About 5,000 members of leftist groups rallied with human rights advocates, including priests and other religious, outside the House of Representatives as Arroyo delivered her address.

Arroyo said she wants to “fight against lawless violence” by asking Congress to enact laws enabling a proper state response to political violence.

Bishop Arturo Bastes of Sorsogon echoed the church’s concern about the killings and poverty in the country.

“The picture of the Philippines is not as good as what she (Arroyo) told us because we (still) experience real poverty and extrajudicial killings,” Bishop Bastes said in a statement released by the Philippine bishops’ conference July 24.

Arroyo has been accused of cheating in the 2004 presidential elections, but attempts to impeach her have failed. The former vice president succeeded ousted president Joseph Estrada in 2001 and publicly stated she would not run in the 2004 presidential elections. However, she ran in 2004, saying that she knew how to steer the country toward progress.

In her recent address to Congress, she said, “I will not be in the way of anyone’s ambition” for president in 2010. However, she added that she also would not allow anyone to prevent her vision of a modern Philippines from becoming “permanently rooted” and bearing fruit by the end of her term.