Protesters put heat on Arroyo amid widening calls for truth

Bishops press for removal of obstacles to Senate probe on broadband scandal

In the third mass protest in a month, thousands of students and left-wing activists pressed their call for President Gloria Arroyo's resignation over corruption allegations implicating her and her husband.

Police estimated the protesters at 6,000 at their peak, smaller than the tens of thousands who rallied two weeks ago in the biggest protest since the Senate opened hearings into the scandal last year.

Several Roman Catholic bishops and dozens of priests and nuns critical of Arroyo joined the rally.

Some released doves and green balloons to signify peace and the search for truth.

The Senate has been investigating allegations that Arroyo, her husband Mike Arroyo (right) and former Comelec chairman Benjamin Abalos benefited from huge kickbacks in an aborted US$330 million deal with China's ZTE Corp to set up a nationwide broadband network.

Malacanang dismissed the charges as hearsay and opposition "grandstanding."

Mike Arroyo and Abalos, who resigned last year after he was implicated, have both denied any wrongdoing. ZTE has denied bribing anyone. Arroyo canceled the contract in September because of the controversy.

Scores of marchers from urban poor communities carried bamboo crosses with placards saying "Stop the Suffering" as they chanted "Oust Gloria!"

In a statement, Renato Reyes, secretary general of the left-wing alliance Bayan, said the issues of "corruption, human rights abuses and abuse of power" remain, "so the protests will continue."

Bishop Teodoro Bacani repeated a call by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines for Arroyo to "remove all obstructions to the discovery of the truth" behind the broadband deal.

He said Arroyo hasn't yet directed her officials to speak out "no matter who gets hurt, no matter who is involved."

Deputy presidential spokeswoman Lorelei Fajardo welcomed the rally as an "exercise of the democratic freedom we all enjoy" but urged the protesters to be responsible "and express themselves in a civilized manner and not resort to name calling."

On Thursday, about 80 former senior officials who served under Arroyo and four previous administrations said in a statement they found her "complicit with and, in fact, at the center of, the corruption and cover-up" of the broadband deal.

Court clears Imelda of fraud charges

Imelda Marcos (right) has been acquitted of 32 counts of illegal transfers of about US$863m into Swiss bank accounts.

The ruling by a lower court in Manila ended the 17-year corruption trial of the former first lady.

Marcos and two associates were accused of unlawfully opening bank accounts in Switzerland using the names of 10 foundations linked to the Marcos family allegedly to hide ill-gotten wealth.

Judge Silvino Pampino said there

was insufficient evidence to convict Marcos of 32 counts of illegal money transfers abroad during the 20-year rule of her husband, Ferdinand.

"This court cannot in all conscience convict the accused on the basis of mere hearsay and on the basis of documents which were not authenticated and proved in the proper manner," he said in his judgment. Pampino said the prosecution had failed to prove Marcos' wrongdoing beyond a reasonable doubt. "The accused has the constitutional presumption of innocence."

Marcos said she was "so happy and I thank the Lord that the 32 cases have been dismissed".

"This will subtract from the 901 cases that were filed against the Marcoses," she said. The Marcoses had been accused of stealing as much as US$10 billion from state coffers.

IBANGBALITA

BATA, 4, NATUPOK

Isang apat na anyos na batang lalaki ang nalitson ng buhay at kasamang natupok sa nasunog nilang bahay sa Kabacan, Cotabato City.

Nagmistulang uling na ang mga labi ng biktimang si Mama Sambulawan nang marekober ng mga awtoridad matapos maapula ang sunog.

Batay sa ulat kahapon sa Camp Crame, pasado alas 9.45 ng umaga nang magsimulang mag-apoy ang nirerentahang apartment ng pamilya ng biktima sa nabanggit na lugar.

Sa pagsisiyasat, lumitaw na iniwang mag-isa ang natutulog na bata ng kanyang inang si Hasleya ngunit sandali pa lamang umano ang nakakalipas ay sumiklab na ang apoy at mabilis na kumalat sa buong kabahayan.

US SAILOR NA-ATIVAN

Makalipas ang ilang araw na pagkawala, natagpuan na ang isang US Navy serviceman na hinihinalang nabiktima ng Ativan gang sa probinsya ng Cebu.

Ang biktimang umano'y latang-lata pa nang masumpungan kamakalawa sa Prince Court Motel sanhi ng epekto ng ipinainom ditong droga.

Siya'y nakilalang si Jude Michael Guido, miyembro ng USNS Supply Vessel na dumaong sa Cebu kamakailan.

Sa inisyal na pagsisiyasat, lumitaw na nag-check in umano ang dayuhan kasama ang dalawang 'di pa nakikilalang mga babae ngunit mula noon ay hindi na nakalabas pa ng inukupahang kuwarto ang US sailor

TALON, IWAS-HOLDAP

Sa takot na maholdap, mas ginusto pa ng dalawang babaeng pasahero ang ipagsapalaran ang kanilang buhay matapos tumalon sa sinasakyang jeep na hinoldap ng dalawang lalaki sa Sta Cruz, Maynila.

Dinala sa Philippine General Hospital sina Marieta Villamor, 39, ng Rosario St, Makati City at Zenaida Celoban, 67, ng San Pascual, Malate.