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Uncertain status for GMA trip

Visit to go ahead even as Donald Tsang schedule clouds hopes for official meetings

Jose Marcelo in Hong Kong

A scheduling problem on Hong Kong's end has kept the status of President Arroyo's (right) visit uncertain, just two weeks before her scheduled arrival.

The SAR government has relayed through diplomatic channels its wish to turn Arroyo's coming trip into an official visit but has stopped short of making a formal invitation until Chief Executive Donald Tsang's schedule is sorted out, according to sources.

"In due time, we'll make an an-

nouncement, but at this time, wala pa. When we do get the instructions eventually, we'll make one," Consul General Al Vicente told *Filipino Globe*.

What is certain is that Arroyo, whose last official visit to Hong Kong came in the early months of her presidency in 2001, will be the keynote speaker in the 11th Asian Investment Conference on March 31.

The rest of the itinerary will depend on whether Tsang would be available for bilateral meetings with Arroyo around the dates of the President's visit, sources said.



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Still officials, short of time, are preparing for the President's arrival under the premise that it would be an official visit.

Sources added the consulate is looking at a March 30 arrival for the

"The feelers came from the Hong Kong government. I think they feel that since the President has been here a few times on personal

visits, why not make it an official visit this time," consulate officials said.

Still officials, short of time, are preparing for the President's arrival under the premise that it would be an official visit.

Sources added the consulate is looking at a March 30 arrival for the President's party while preparing for a three-day stay.

Also making plans are militant groups in the territory which have vowed to "make their presence felt" during the visit.

"May pakpak naman ang balita, so if ever matuloy man ang Presidente we'll make sure na nandiyan kami," said Dolores Balladares-Pelaez, chairwoman of United Filipinos in Hong Kong.

A loose anti-Arroyo coalition in the territory has urged migrant groups to snub invitations for a meeting with the President.

Prospects bleak for prisoner transfer deal

Jose Marcelo in Hong Kong

The coming presidential visit may be as good a time as any to tie up loose ends on the prisoner exchange agreement with the Hong Kong government, but consulate officials are not keeping their hopes up.

Six years after the pact was sealed by the Philippine Senate and the SAR's Executive Council, the Transfer of Sentenced Persons treaty has yet to be enforced due to the absence of the implementing rules and regulations.

And consulate officials see no tangible signs that the guidelines, mothballed for so long at the Department of Justice, will be drafted and delivered in time for President Arroyo's scheduled arrival in the territory late this month.

"The ball has long been in our court," said consul Vic Dimagiba, head of the consulate's legal division. "But there seems to be no movement toward that."

If there are plans to seal the deal in time for the President's visit, DOJ officials should be hard at work months in advance trying to put the fine points of the implementing rules and regulations to bed, Dimagiba said.

But checks done by the consulate over the past year, the last in November, yielded negative results.

"We followed up the progress of the implementing rules and regulations late last year, basically inquiring if there had been any developments. We sent it both through the Department of Foreign Affairs Manila office, and di-

BY THE NUMBERS

Number years the prisoner transfer agreement has been mothballed

6

rectly to the DOJ," Dimagiba said.

"But Manila didn't respond. In fact, the DOJ didn't even acknowledge receipt of the letters," he added.

The TSP agreement allows Hong Kong and Philippine nationals to serve their sentences in their respective countries. At least seven Filipinos imprisoned in the SAR have expressed willingness to avail of the treaty when it was ratified in June 2002.

But the DOJ, tasked by the Senate to draft the implementing guidelines, has dragged its feet for so long that Veronica Coady, a convicted Filipino businesswoman who was among the first to express a desire to avail of the program, has completed her sentence and has since returned home.

The wife of another Filipino serving time for manslaughter at the Stanley prison facility has opted to work as a domestic helper in the territory just to be able to visit her husband regularly, consulate officials said.

"The problem is, nagtuturuan talaga [ang DOJ at ang Senado] kung sino ang gagawa ng IRR. But the fact is, the Senate has directed the DOJ to come up with these guidelines. Pero hanggang ngayon wala pa ring nangyayari," Dimagiba said.



It's now down to lawmakers and the Department of Justice to make the guidelines for the prisoner transfer agreement signed six years ago.

ANGBANSA

Iloilo

The Aeta ethnic group in barangay Lipata in Barotac Viejo has been included in the list of agrarian reform communities designated by the Department of Agrarian Reform.

The launching of barangay Lipata as a special agrarian reform community was led by DAR assistant secretary Kashmir Leyretana.

Under the special agrarian reform program for the ethnic community, Lipata will be offered to investors interested in developing the area.

Lipata is situated about eight kilometers from the town center and can only be reached by narrow-road vehicles such as tricycles and motorbikes.

Albay

Authorities are alarmed by the rising incidence of incest rape in remote villages of the province, the Albay Provincial Peace and Order Council said.

Albay governor Joey Sarte Salceda created a task force to study the problem and draw up measures. "It is the moral duty of the state to address this



problem using state resources," Salceda said.

He also directed the provincial social welfare office to conduct "post traumatic" intervention on victims.

The task force is chaired by the provincial prosecutor.

Palawan

Highly urbanized Puerto Princesa City has forged sisterhood ties with Makati City.

Mayor Edward Hagedorn and Mayor Jejomar Binay signed the agreement to promote and foster mutual understanding, friendship and goodwill. Both agreed to create economic partnership, cultural and educational exchanges, develop arts and tourism, assist each other on urban planning, extend medical missions and protect the environment.

Hagedorn expressed his intention to promote Puerto Princesa's eco-tourism in Makati.