

Written by Amina Rasul

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The spectacle of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (PGMA) snubbed repeatedly by another head of state made even me cringe. After US President Barack Obama adroitly escaped photo opportunities with her in Davos, her handlers should have advised her against going to the National Prayer Breakfast (NPB) in Washington, DC, on February 5.

The Prayer Breakfast, organized by US lawmakers, is annually held on the first Thursday of February. Since this is a major occasion for networking with the leaders of the US government, especially the American President, guests from around the world are invited early. It seems Senator Chiz Escudero had received his invitation months ago. Mrs. Arroyo's invitation, however, came on January 31, a mere five days before the event. (Malacañang had been trying to wangle an invitation since October). And still Press Secretary Cerge Remonde tells media that, "***This is a signal, honor and recognition that the US and international community are acknowledging the leadership of President Arroyo*** ."

At great expense, Mrs. Arroyo and her entourage detoured from a state visit to Bahrain to fly to DC, stayed at the most expensive hotel in DC (Four Seasons), only to be snubbed yet again by President Obama. If this invitation is to be regarded as recognition of the leadership of Mrs. Arroyo from the international community, then she should fire her handlers.

Meanwhile, back home, more international recognition. The International Red Cross team has been held hostage by a band of thugs for over a month now. The Philippines has the dubious distinction of being the only country where Red Cross workers have been kidnapped. Their safety assured by both sides in war-torn countries, it must boggle the world's imagination that a Red Cross team could be kidnapped after visiting a Sulu jail, which was 5 meters away from the Provincial Capitol!

The military has bombed the lair of notorious kidnapper Albader Parad to no avail. In building up Parad's alleged Abu Sayyaf/Jemaah Islamiyyah role, the government attains more legitimacy for its ongoing military operations in Sulu. Terrorist *kasi*. If Parad had been billed as a kidnapper, like the *Kuratong Baleleng* gang, the failure of governance under the Arroyo administration would be glaring.

While Mrs. Arroyo was waiting to ambush President Obama for a photo, more international

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recognition was being given to her administration. Headlines: corruption and collusion in the bidding for World Bank projects, based on a leaked World Bank report. The report had been provided to the Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez, a classmate of First Gentleman Miguel Arroyo. The detailed report tracked the corruption all the way to the First Gentleman. The WB report stated that a Japanese contractor linked a former senator and the First Gentleman to manipulation of bids. The contractor even said that the two had a “rough approach”. In Tagalog, we would say “garapal”.

The Bank report, conducted by a crack international team of investigators, details what many Filipinos already suspect. Or know. The WB gave its sensitive report directly to the government offices duly authorized to receive such: the Department of Finance and the Ombudsman. It did not have a press conference to deliver the bombshell.

The Arroyo allies in the Senate want to grill World Bank Country Director Bert Hofman. I would have asked the Ombudsman what steps were taken after receiving the WB report in 2007. Instead of investigating the Ombudsman, the Department of Public Works and Highways and other involved government institutions, the Senate chose to run after the World Bank Country Director. Instead of investigating the accused, the Senate has chosen to run after the accuser for adhering to his duty to safeguard funds entrusted to the Bank by member countries and for observing protocol in releasing sensitive information.

While Mrs. Arroyo was waiting to ambush President Obama for a photo, more international recognition was being given to her administration. Headlines: corruption and collusion in the bidding for World Bank projects, which involved First Gentleman Miguel Arroyo. An International Red Cross team has been held hostage by a band of thugs in Sulu.

The World Bank, in a diplomatic statement issued on February 12, welcomed the “Philippine Government's initiative to follow-up on the World Bank's decision to debar several foreign and Philippine firms on the basis of collusion”, stressing “our shared goal of improving governance and fighting corruption in the Philippines”.

Further, the Bank offered to help government conduct its own investigations.

According to the WB statement, together with the “Referral Report, issued last November 2007,

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was also an offer to begin a cooperative relationship between the Bank and the investigative agency, if the investigative agency so desires. A member country government that has received a Referral Report and is seeking to investigate the case can always ask the Bank for additional information. In this case, the World Bank has offered follow-up assistance to the Ombudsman in conducting her investigations”.

Ombudsman Gutierrez, dressed aggressively in battle red therefore mesmerized me as she pointed her guns at the WB. She and Senator Miriam Santiago were fascinating to watch, their hackles raised by this institution “squatting” in the country. Wish we had more such squatters, who support infrastructure projects all over the country, who hold annual “markets” to encourage civil society organizations to participate in peace and development, which very quietly investigate corruption and provide the report to the government in spite of the well-known suspicion that government is at the center of corruption.

Madame Arroyo, so sorry. I don't think President Obama would be eager to have his photo taken with a leader with your international recognition. Best to stay home and have your photo ops with captured criminals brought to Malacañang. Now if you can only capture Albader Parad

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