

The News UpFront: (TOP STORY) as of Friday, 22 June 2007

~~ The plum diplomatic post currently occupied by Philippine Ambassador Willy Gaa is reportedly being eyed by a member of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's cabinet. While there is no official confirmation of this behind-the-scene development, Filipinos in Los Angeles are gearing up to oppose the move.

ACCORDING TO STILL-UNCONFIRMED STORY

Report Claims Ambassador Willy Gaa to be Replaced by a 'Rogue' Member of GMA's Cabinet

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

SAN DIEGO - An unconfirmed report that Philippine Ambassador to the United States, Willy Gaa, is being lobbied for removal and replaced by a "rogue" has triggered

moves in Los Angeles to thwart it.

While neither the alleged ouster nor the planned succession could be independently confirmed at this time, however, community activist and media blogger Bobby Reyes is already mounting a campaign to oppose the unofficial nomination.

"My friends and I are willing to wage another 'war' against the appointment of a politician as a top diplomat in the United States," Reyes said in Los Angeles where he leads a number of community-based organizations.

The story about Ambassador Gaa's fate was circulated in the internet by Ado Paglinawan, a former official who had worked at the Philippine Embassy's press office during the time of President Corazon Aquino.

According to Paglinawan, a cabinet member of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo whom he identified as Secretary Ronaldo Puno "is now lobbying (the President) to remove (Ambassador) Gaa and name himself as the replacement".

"This chameleon par excellence has fleeced every administration except Cory Aquino's," he claimed in his web statement posted in the privately-owned "NaFFAA forum", which is not related to the paper-huge National Federation of Filipino American Associations based in Washington, DC.

Paglinawan said he was responsible for botching "arms deals, lobbies and consultancies" that Puno had proposed in the years 1986 through 1992 when Puno worked for a succession of Philippine presidents starting from Ferdinand Marcos, Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada, and now, with Macapagal-Arroyo.

When asked how he knew of Puno's allegedly nefarious activities, Paglinawan said "most informations about Ronnie Puno are common knowledge."

In fact, he explained, "they have appeared in at least two of Manila's leading newspapers - Philippines Daily Inquirer (www.inquirer.net) and Philippine Star (www.philstar.com)."

Reyes, meanwhile, said "it would be insanity" to replace Ambassador Gaa when the lobbying for benefits for Filipino American veterans is at its height in the US Congress. "It will be like replacing the proverbial horses in midstream," he stressed.

Reyes has a track record of success in opposing appointees, particularly in the Los Angeles consulate. He and his supporters had previously foiled the nomination of Tomas Gomez as consul general. He also spearheaded the recall to Manila of former consul general Edwin Bael.

Should Gaa be removed and Puno takes over, it would not be the first time a politician would occupy the Philippines' top diplomatic post.

A Filipino community activist and political leader in San Francisco, Jose G. Caedo, said only two -- Ambassador Raul Rabe and the incumbent Willy Gaa -- out of the seven appointees who had occupied the position are career diplomats.

Ernesto Lagdameo, Emmanuel Pelaez, Benjamin "Kokoy" Romualdez, Ernesto Maceda and Alberto del Rosario were political appointees, Caedo said.

"Who questioned their qualifications, or the prerogative of a President to make such an appointment on a discretionary matter?" he posed.

Caedo said that to call Puno "a cheat and a butcher" is just "making matters melodramatic or hysterical".

"The confirmation of consuls and ambassadors to foreign countries devolves upon the Commission on Appointments. That is where Puno's appointment will be evaluated," Caedo stated.

Paglinawan referred to Puno variously in his posting as a "rascal," a "rogue," a "cheat," a "butcher," a "mechanic" and a "real estate magnate" for allegedly masterminding and or participating in a number of questionable activities for the Philippine government.

Puno, whom Paglinawan said has a residence in

northern Virginia, could not be immediately reached for comment. # # #

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