

**REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR ALBERT DEL ROSARIO
AT THE FOREIGN BUYERS ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES'
30TH ANNIVERSARY – NOVEMBER 23, 2007- THE MANILA PENINSULA**

Published in Philippine Daily Inquirer Dec. 10, 2007

Mr. Eli Miranda, President of the Foreign Buyers Association of the Philippines, Undersecretaries Luis Liwanag and Fotunato dela Pena, Officers and Directors of FOBAP other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Please allow me to thank you for the honor of being invited this evening in celebration of your Association's 30th year of achievement and excellence. I also wish to congratulate the Officers and Directors of FOBAP led by President Eli Miranda who happens to be a distinguished fellow-member of the Management Association of the Philippines.

I am likewise grateful for the kind introduction by Mr. Vic Agustin. It is to my regret that I did not become a member of FOBAP when decades ago we founded and I was asked to head a company called PREL which organized and operated an exclusive buying agency for WALMART in 5 Asian countries including Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Oddly enough, at least during my watch, PREL did not have responsibility for the Philippines. Having subsequently sold the company, I now vaguely recall the challenges of finding the right people for each country office, identifying products, sourcing primary and secondary suppliers, pricing competitively, controlling quality, delivering on time and having to fully satisfy the client at all times.

I remember reading not too long ago a feature on WALMART in either Time or Newsweek magazine, for example, when a reference was made about the most important man in global retailing – one who was in charge of buying a couple of hundred billion dollars from China alone for WALMART, now the largest company in Fortune's 500. His name is Emilio Cui. By the way, Chiqui, as we call him, is a Filipino who I had the good fortune of recruiting at the very outset to run our Singapore operation. As demonstrated by the likes of Chiqui and yourselves, I say hooray for the Filipino!

That for me was many moons ago. From 2001-2006, I had the privilege of humbly serving our country as the Ambassador to the United States. In addition to being a treaty ally and a provider of the highest level of official development grant assistance, the United States, as you know, is cumulatively our largest foreign investor and is as well our largest trading partner.

That said, perhaps what I can provide for you in the next few minutes is my overview of how the people in the US perceive the Philippines as of the time I left there a little more than a year ago. This hopefully will be of interest and serve to broaden your perspective.

If this is acceptable, let me articulate – if you will – certain notable sentiments from the private and public sectors in the US.

One great observation is that nearly everyone wants the Arroyo government to succeed.

A second great observation is that there exists a huge reservoir of American goodwill for the Filipino people. Every where you go, you will find this to be true, including the Executive and Legislative Branches of the US Government. For the first time in US-RP relations, for instance, we were successful in organizing a Philippine Friendship Caucus composed of 82 US Congressmen who have been most helpful in promoting Philippine interest to the extent of our being able to obtain in excess of \$1.2Billion in defense, security and economic assistance over a five-year period. To say the least, I had been extremely well received not only in nearly 40 states but also in twice as many cities by all levels of government. This indeed was most gratifying.

The not so great observation is that we have not been fully successful in tapping this goodwill. In order to change this, there is a consensus that we must show more political will to do what is right in addressing our country's problems. We are expected to do what is right 1) in defending our democracy, 2) in continuing to reform the economy, 3) in improving governance through addressing corruption and inequality, and 4) in fighting terrorism and maintaining peace and order.

In terms of defending our democracy, our many friends are expecting that we will be able to reform our electoral process. In the Halls of US Congress, there are furthermore deep concerns about alleged human rights violations against journalists and political activists which remain to be addressed.

In terms of economic reforms, it is essential for us to improve infrastructure and productivity. We must also lower the costs of doing business, eliminate red tape, and have a working national policy on competitiveness.

In terms of good governance, we need to address the problem of corruption by accelerating effective programs against smugglers and tax evaders. The full force of the law should be applied to those found guilty and the message must be established that no one is above the law.

In terms of addressing inequality, we must invest more in livelihood, in education, and in the health of our people. This fortunately has begun as a result of improved fiscal performance.

In terms of fighting terrorism and maintaining peace and order, we must stay on course in reforming the AFP and the PNP. We must, as well, finalize the elusive peace process with the MILF to unleash the full potential of Mindanao.

Of equal importance, we need to encourage our national leadership to give more focus to execution rather than rhetoric. In other words, we must walk the talk.

In terms of execution, there were countless opportunities for private and public cooperation. To illustrate, there was a proposed preferential legislation in US Congress on canned tuna products for the Andean countries which was intended to wean them away from the illegal drug trade. The proposed legislation would have resulted in adversely affecting our canned tuna industry located in General Santos. As 60% of total production was being exported to the United States, the viability of the entire industry was placed in jeopardy.

Obviously, the whole preferential legislation would have undermined the RP-US partnership in revitalizing Mindanao. The resulting hoards of the unemployed would moreover make people increasingly vulnerable in being recruited for terrorism. The argument was a convincing one but it had to be proactively advanced. To successfully maintain the status quo in the protection of our canned tuna industry, we marched to Congress 128 times in 6 weeks. Although the canned tuna industry provided the Embassy with an expense allowance of P2M, we happily did not utilize any part of it.

At the Embassy, we exercised all possible initiatives to open and enlarge markets in the US for Philippine products. This included renewing the GSP privilege which provides for non-tariff exports on over 500 products for another 5 years and increasing its utilization to \$1Billion.

We were moreover working towards a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with the US which could have been made to happen but did not. The initiative as of 2003 was officially offered by the US, but notwithstanding our encouragement for it to move forward, it resulted in another missed opportunity for the Philippines.

A few weeks ago, I was interviewed by the Foreign Affairs Journal, a very influential publication read by heads of state throughout the world as well as by decision makers in the US Capital. At the conclusion of the interview, I was asked what I would expect to say if I were to be interviewed again four years from now. My response was all economic experts would seem to agree that the outlook for Asia in terms of stability and economic growth is as good as it can ever be. My hope is that four years from now, we will be in a position to say that the Philippines did not get left behind.

Several months before, I was also invited to speak by the graduating class of the UP School of Economics. It was for me an occasion to express concern at the silence and the seeming apathy of our youth. I felt very deeply that, following the youth of yesterday, the youth of today should be taking up the cudgels for the voiceless and the marginalized sectors of our society. If the negative perception is valid, we therefore need to strongly

encourage our children to help build our nation by advancing the true concept of a proactive citizenship.

Notwithstanding the increasing number of disappointments and challenges, there still remains the opportunity for us to move forward if our national leadership is prepared to lead and do what is right in defending our democracy, in continuing to reform our economy, in improving governance through addressing corruption and inequality and in fighting terrorism and maintaining peace and order.

As consistent with enunciations by President Arroyo of building a strong Republic, if leadership by example can finally be provided, what remains is for all of us to fully join together in doing what needs to be done. END