

PRESS RELEASE

Department of Foreign Affairs

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Arrival Statement of

DR. ALBERTO G. ROMULO
Secretary of Foreign Affairs

Official Trips to the United States of America, Azerbaijan,
Switzerland, The Vatican, Italy, and Spain

02 July 2006

I arrive today from a series of official overseas trips that served to advance the foreign policy agenda of Her Excellency President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

On my visits to six states spanning three continents I conferred with key foreign government officials, policy makers, and our overseas Filipino communities in pursuit of President Macapagal Arroyo's foreign policy of further deepening our relations with key allies, rekindling historic alliances, seeking new partnerships, harnessing the potential of overseas Filipinos, and reinforcing our shared commitments with the community of nations.

I delivered the Keynote Message at the Gala Dinner held on 17 June 2006 in Washington, D.C. on the occasion of the Centennial of Filipino Migration to the United States.

At the event, I paid tribute to the significant contributions of Filipino-Americans, now the second largest Asian-American immigrant group, to the entire fabric of American society. I cited the journey of our compatriots to America as "a saga of great courage, undying faith and fortitude" and the key role our overseas Filipinos play as indelible links to a key ally and partner.

In Baku, Azerbaijan, I attended the 33rd Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) from 18 to 19 June upon the gracious invitation of my esteemed colleague, Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov of Azerbaijan.

In my address before the Plenary Session of the ICFM, I expressed appreciation for the role the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has played in the search for peace in the Southern Philippines. Our participation in the ICFM is another important step in our quest for meaningful and lasting stability in Mindanao and for deeper relations with the OIC and its member countries.

In Geneva, I delivered a statement at the High-Level portion of the First Meeting of the newly-created United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) to which the Philippines was elected on 09 May 2006.

I reiterated that the Philippines' membership in the HRC attests to our commitment to the promotion of human rights.

I likewise outlined our country's vision for the Human Rights Council as a body which will:

- enable the community of nations to protect and promote the rights of all the world's peoples,
- deal with human rights violations devoid of any political agenda,
- maximize capacity building and technical assistance for human rights promotion, and
- act as a partner, not an opponent, of states in question, particularly those requiring international assistance in the field of human rights.

I stated that among our priorities as a member of the HRC would be the protection of the human rights of disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society.

On the last two legs of my official trip, I joined President Macapagal Arroyo during her Official Visits to the Holy See, Italy, and Spain from 24 to 30 June.

The Department of Foreign Affairs worked towards developing and implementing the theme of the President's visit to the Holy See, Italy, and Spain summed up as "*Vida, Solidaridad y Prosperidad*" (life, solidarity, and prosperity).

At the Vatican, I was privileged to be with the President at her Special Audience with His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic faithful throughout the world.

President Macapagal Arroyo's pro-life and pro-poor agenda received inspiration and guidance from the Pope's blessings. The audience with the Holy Father likewise placed the spotlight on the Philippines' key role in the Roman Catholic community, as the largest Catholic nation in Asia and the third largest in the world. The Pope likewise expressed appreciation for the Philippine Government's abolition of the death penalty.

The President extended an invitation for the Pope to visit the Philippines in the future.

I joined the President in her meetings with the newly-elected leaders of Italy, President Giorgio Napolitano and Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

The President exchanged views with the two leaders on matters of common concern such as the Philippine initiative on Debt-for-Millennium Development Goals, furthering interfaith dialogue, counter-terrorism, the progress of the peace process with the MILF, and the welfare of nearly 100,000 Filipino expatriates in Italy.

The separate meetings with Italy's leaders has raised significant hopes for the early conclusion of three (3) proposed agreements on social security, automatic conversion of drivers' licenses, and agricultural technology and trade cooperation with the Italian Government. The proposed agreements are designed to increase the threshold of social protection for the nearly 100,000 overseas Filipinos in Italy as well as enhancing the international competitiveness of the country.

During the President's Official Visit to Spain which coincided with the 4th Anniversary of Philippine-Spanish Friendship Day and Philippines-Spain Cultural Year 2006, our long historic ties were rekindled and reinvigorated.

In her meetings with King Juan Carlos I and Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the President reiterated the Philippines' desire to work towards even closer relations with Spain through bolstering diplomatic, political, economic, labor, legislative, and socio-cultural relations between the two countries.

A Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation for the Management of Migratory Flows was signed on the first day of the President's visit. The MOU would benefit up to 100,000 Filipino healthcare workers under a pilot project arrangement.

Other highlights of the President's visit include the signing by the Defense Departments of the Philippines and Spain of a Letter of Intent on Defense Cooperation.

The President likewise addressed the Congreso de los Diputados (Congress of Deputies) and met with Madrid Mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón.

In keeping with the major theme of prosperity, the President pushed for increased economic exchanges between the Philippines and Spain in her remarks before the Confederation of Employers and Industries of Spain (CEOE) and in her separate meetings with Spanish investors.

Recognizing the important role played by the Filipino-Hispano Community and the cultural sector in promoting closer relations, the President graced the Filipiniana Exhibit at the Centro Cultural Conde Duque and a Reception on the occasion of Philippines-Spain Friendship Day.

The Department will continue to work for a more dynamic and enduring partnership with Spain as preparations commence for the President's State Visit to Spain in 2007, an unprecedented arrangement coming soon after her just concluded Official Visit. The State Visit to Spain next year coincides with the 60th Anniversary of the establishment of Post-Modern Diplomatic Relations between the Philippines and Spain.

The President and the rest of the delegation have returned to the Philippines, buoyed with enthusiasm and encouragement out of the warm reception and firm commitments offered by our European partners from Spain, Italy and the Holy See. **END**

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