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PH hosts 5th int'l conference vs corruption

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[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#)

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BACKCHANNELS Delegates to the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac) exchange pleasantries with President Aquino during the opening of conference held at the Philippine International Convention Center in Manila on Thursday. With the President are (from left) Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile, Vice Pre Binay and Sen. Edgardo Angara. LYN RILLON

President Aquino on Thursday rallied lawmakers from 80 countries attending a

against corruption to step up efforts to eliminate this modern-day evil.

“The message of our times is clear,” Mr. Aquino told the 5th conference of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac). “The gap between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless, has become too huge. Too many people are being left behind. And it has also become clear inequity is borne of corruption.”

He said the greatest challenge for any modern society “is how to stem the corruption that has feasted on the very moral fabric of our society and institutions.”

Sen. Edgardo Angara, newly elected chairman of Gopac, said corruption was not limited to the government—it also occurred with regularity in the business sector, thus requiring much vigilance from parties interested in eradicating it.

Some 500 delegates, including 12 heads of parliaments, from 80 countries are attending the four-day conference on the theme “Good Leaders, Good Laws, Good Citizens.” The meeting is being held at the Philippine International Convention Center in Pasay City.

Gopac is the only international network dedicated to promoting good governance and combating corruption around the world.

Culture of accountability

In his keynote speech, Mr. Aquino—who is banking on an anticorruption campaign to help turn the country around—said elected leaders the world over were “forming a more cohesive force against corruption.”

“The more we share our ideas, the more we listen to one another—the sooner we will achieve our goal of eliminating corruption,” Mr. Aquino said.

He said eliminating corruption must be a priority of government to prevent corrupt officials from being elected to high positions of authority.

“We know that corruption cannot be eliminated by sending a few erring officials to jail, or by exposing a single faulty contract, or by removing from office a single oppressive tyrant,” he said.

Obviously referring to former President and now Rep. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Mr. Aquino said: “The Filipino people have no doubt taken huge strides towards establishing a culture of fairness and accountability when no less than a former president was charged with plunder, among other things.”

He also noted that Chief Justice Renato Corona was impeached and stripped of his position after he was found to have lied about more than 98 percent of his cash assets.

Philippines an example

“But while these cases have an undeniable impact in our cultural milieu, without structural reform, another corrupt President might one day take over the reins of power, another Chief Justice might one day again betray the public trust,” Mr. Aquino warned.

He said the problem of corruption must be approached “with the long-term in mind, not to be mere blips in the radar.”



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“As parliamentarians, this is your task, and perhaps you will be interested in the policies that have gotten us to where we are now, and which can also form the basis of change in your respective home countries,” Mr. Aquino said.

He said the “overarching idea” behind his anticorruption efforts was simple: “Go back to the basics of public service. In short, to do the right thing.”

He cited the success of the public works department in lowering the cost of the Quezon-Araneta Avenues underpass in Quezon City from P694 million to P430 million.

He also said the justice and social welfare departments, the Metro Manila Development Authority and the Technical Educational Skills Development Authority had established internal mechanisms to police themselves and respond to administrative complaints.

The budget department has also been taking care of taxpayers’ money by using the zero-base budgeting system—“a system that makes certain that we get more bang for our buck, rather than rehashing and funding the same old projects.”

‘Sick man of Asia’ no more

Speaking ahead of the President, Angara said the Philippines had previously been tagged the “sick man of Asia” but “things have been turning around.”

“We must be doing something right,” Angara said in an ambush interview.

He said that previously, corruption was not talked about openly. “But people realized the cost it inflicts on people, infrastructures, schools and hospitals. Now, when they want a better life, they want a better government.”

Angara, whose term will end this June, backed Mr. Aquino’s call for structural reforms via legislation.

“The opportunities for graft and corruption in government are always there because funds are present due to annual appropriations in the budget,” Angara told reporters.

“But corruption in business is more subtle and sophisticated ... Note the global phenomenon where people in banking and the financial sector profited immediately just from the rigging of interest rates.”

Angara said “financial chicanery” occurred through the following examples:

A would-be homeowner would need “around 33 signatures from the barangay chair to the mayor to the executives” of the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council before construction of his house can begin.

Politicians receive campaign contributions from unscrupulous businessmen to whom they become beholden.

Businessmen would overprice products or services and offer commissions to court officers.

A long, long time



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Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile, who also delivered welcome remarks, warned that any President would not be able to stamp out corruption within a six-year term as it would “take a long, long time” to do so.

Enrile told reporters that Mr. Aquino’s “good intentions in reducing, if not eradicating, corruption” were evident in his tenacity to convict Corona in an impeachment trial. But eradicating corruption could not rest solely on the President, he said.

“It depends upon many layers of government bureaucracy and apart from that, you go to the court where the tedious process of presentation of evidence, argumentation and counterargumentation, maneuvers and counter maneuvers will cost time and delay,” he said.

“I said six years is very short ... not only in the Philippines but anywhere,” he added.

Speaker Feliciano Belmonte Jr. called attention to efforts to prevent further cases of corruption.

“We cannot rely solely on anticorruption laws and we should aim for prevention by undertaking changes in government structures and processes,” he said.

Belmonte noted that Transparency International showed the country “significantly moving up” from 129th to 105th in anticorruption ranking “but remains at high risk for corruption.”

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