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'Gov't must sustain anti-graft efforts'

(philstar.com) | Updated February 1, 2013 - 11:45am

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MANILA, Philippines - President Aquino's resolve to fight graft and corruption in all levels of the Philippine bureaucracy has the full backing of Congress, Speaker Feliciano Belmonte Jr. declared before a gathering of global parliamentarians.

The Speaker delivered his welcome message during the opening of the 5th Global Conference of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians against Corruption (GOPAC) at the PICC Reception Thursday.

He surmised that Manila was unanimously chosen to host the GOPAC conference, last hosted by Mexico, "in the light of President Aquino's resolve to fight graft and corruption."

Two years ago, Belmonte recalled, the Mexico Declaration provided the blueprint for GOPAC's action plan.

"Our gathering here in Manila provides us another opportunity to renew our commitment to the Mexico Declaration, and to inspire and educate each other on the fight against corruption," the Speaker said.

Even as GOPAC is now composed of about 700 members from more than 45 countries, "we are broadening our networks for collaboration and effective sharing of good practices to stop corruption," he added.

Declaring that corrupt activities exist when government processes are unwieldy and tedious, Belmonte noted that the country has been receiving positive news and accolades for its fiscal and institutional reforms.

"According to Moody's Analytics, the twin policy of the Philippine government in giving infrastructure a big push and reducing corruption are factors that significantly attract both domestic and foreign investments – thus increasing the economy's long-term growth prospects," he said.

Belmonte, likewise, cited observers of the economy as saying that the fiscal reforms and anti-corruption efforts of the government are starting to pay off.

"Our government is in better fiscal health with the national government deficit likely to be less than 2 percent of GDP in 2012 although the target was originally at 2.6 percent. This can be attributed, in part, to improvements in expenditure management while plugging leakages in the revenue stream," he added.

He also cited the country's resolve to comply with the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) following a multi-sectoral National Dialogue and Action Planning, which were conducted last December 2012.

During the dialogue, a 21-point UNCAC Action Agenda was crafted with a multisectoral Declaration of Commitments for full institutional cooperation to serve the noble objectives of the Convention (UNCAC).

To this day, Belmonte believes that the country's anti-corruption efforts have not been in vain as he referred to a recently released Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2012 by the Transparency International reports that the Philippines has significantly moved up 24 places, from rank 129 in 2011, to 105 in 2012.

"However, even with the improved ranking, the Philippines remains at high risk for corruption. We therefore hope to see a further decline in our CPI as the Aquino government continues to openly fight graft and corruption, and pursue much needed institutional reforms," he told his audience.

Moreover, the Speaker said that when judicial and legal systems, as well as tax administration, financial management, and audit systems are weak – corruption is likely to persist.

"As we cannot rely solely on the enforcement of anti-corruption laws by our police and oversight bodies, our fight against corruption should aim for its prevention by undertaking changes in government structures and processes," he said.

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