

**P**RESIDENT GLORIA Macapagal Arroyo announced on November 7 that she would endorse for Senate ratification the controversial Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) that environmentalists fear will turn the country into a dump site for Japan's toxic and hazardous wastes.

# JPEPA still to undergo Senate inquiry and ratification

■ Photo and text: VANESSA RETUERMA

**P**GMA's announcement was made on the same day that the Senate opened its inquiry into the JPEPA, following growing public criticism and objections to the agreement's provisions that allow the entry into the country of toxic wastes from Japan. Both moves by the executive branch and the Senate came as a sort of relief amidst growing public fear that the controversial agreement, like several free trade agreements concluded in the past, would classify as an executive agreement that would not require Senate ratification.

The JPEPA was signed by President Arroyo and former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on the sideline of the Asian-Europe Meeting in Helsinki, Finland on September 9, 2006.

The agreement seeks to "highly liberalize" Japan-Philippines economic relations by greatly reducing and eliminating trade tariffs in goods and services and expanding investment opportunities between these two countries. Besides improved access to Japan's industrial goods, investments and agriculture export, the Philippine government is particularly keen on the benefits that the economy can potentially gain from

expanding the country's domestic service industry to Japan's labor market. It is said that the agreement contains provisions that would allow Filipino nurses and health care professionals to work in Japan.

However, despite its giddy promises of economic gains for the country that the Philippine government tries to project to the public, the agreement sparked a furor when it was reported that the agreement will trade the entry of Philippine products and overseas workers into the high-paying Japanese market with the entry into the Philippines of more Japanese products, including chemical, hospital and municipal wastes.

The agreement contains provisions that sought to



mandate zero tariff trade on toxic waste and hazardous materials that are listed and banned under national environmental protection laws such as R.A. 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act and R.A. 6969 or the Toxic Substance and Hazardous and Nuclear Waste Act.

In addition to the inclusion of toxic materials on the list of zero tariff tradable goods, there are other disturbing issues in the JPEPA that warrants thorough scrutiny by the Senate. This includes the lack of public information and transparency in the negotiations, and the stringent requirements for professional health practice in Japan. It is well known that the Japanese government has been very particular on its standards for allowing entry of foreign workers even from its trading/allied countries. In the JPEPA, it is clearly stipulated that Filipino nurses and health care professions must first pass their national board exam and gain proficiency in the Japanese language before they can practice and work in Japan. These stiff conditions would certainly have an implication on the high number of deployment of Filipino nurses and health care professionals in Japan and on the figures of remittances that the government projects to gain from the said agreement.

Senators have earlier committed that they would call

public hearings to study the objections of environmentalist groups and other various aspects of the controversial agreement before concurring to the treaty earlier signed by the President.

In an interview on October 27, 2006, Sen. Manuel Roxas II, chair of the Senate committee on trade and commerce that is to conduct the inquiry, stressed the need to further study the "pluses" and "minuses" of the agreement before it is put to vote.

"We need to determine if we will be giving away too much, and if we are going ahead of the World Trade Organization in the trade concession we will be giving to Japan," he said.

"For example, what are we giving up in exchange for the entry of our nurses or tuna export to Japan? We need to compute the aggregate amounts of these concessions, for we may be at the losing end in the long run," Roxas said.

#### SOURCES:

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