

# True state of the nation

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MANILA, Philippines - On Monday President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo delivered her eighth State of the Nation Address (SONA) to Congress. A Pulse Asia survey showed that only 14 percent of the people said they expected the SONA to be truthful. What are the rest of the people to believe?

For starters, the people could read what government statistical agencies, foreign institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and surveys by polling entities like the Social Weather Stations (SWS) and Pulse Asia have to say about the economic and social situation of the nation.

**Poverty** — After eight years of Ms Arroyo, the Philippines remains a poor nation, with 50 percent of the population of 88.6 million rating themselves poor in March 2008, an increase of four percentage points from 46 percent in December 2007. There is, however, said Mahar Mangahas of SWS, a downward trend in poverty from its most recent high of 59 percent in June 2006.

**Hunger** — About 2.9 million families or 14.5 million people experienced involuntary hunger between April and June, the June 2008 SWS survey said. This figure is four percentage points higher than the 10-year average hunger rate of 12.1 percent. Severe hunger went up from 3.2 percent (about 570,000 families or 2.85 million people) to 4.2 percent (760,000 families or 3.8 million people).

**Crime rate** — The total crime volume in the first three months of the year went down by 6.44 percent compared to that in 2007, said Senior Supt. Nicanor Bartolome, spokesperson of the Philippine National Police. But tell that to the one out of 10 families (11.5 percent) who had a member victimized in a street crime from June to December last year. An SWS survey published last February said that 10.5 percent of Filipino families lost property in a house break-in; 8.6 percent encountered pickpockets; 1.9 percent had their vehicle stolen; and 1.3 percent suffered physical violence.

**Employment** — The unemployment rate as of June 2008 was 8.0 percent and underemployment was 19.8 percent, said the National Statistics Office. Because of lack of good job opportunities here, every year hundreds of thousands of Filipinos leave to work abroad. The number of overseas Filipino workers who worked abroad at anytime during the period from April to September 2006 reached 1.52 million, according to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. Last year, they remitted \$14.4 billion—an amount that is helping to keep the economy afloat, but at a great social cost to their families and the nation.

**Education** — A recent UNESCO report ranked the Philippines 74<sup>th</sup> in the Education Development Index, falling below Mongolia, 61<sup>st</sup>; Vietnam, 65<sup>th</sup>; Indonesia, 58<sup>th</sup>; and China, 38<sup>th</sup>. The Philippines performed poorly in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in 2003, ranking 41<sup>st</sup> in Science and 42<sup>nd</sup> in Math in a field of 45. The shortage of classrooms and teachers is becoming more serious every year.

**Health** — Despite the presence of a few modern medical centers in Metro Manila, health conditions

in the Philippines remain among the poorest in East Asia, an ADB report said. The ADB estimated that there is only one doctor for every 9,689 people and only one hospital for every 809 patients. The country is graduating many doctors, nurses and caregivers every year, but they are being exported abroad like commodities.

**Administration of justice** — The wheels of justice grind exceedingly slow, and it is not unusual for even a high-profile case to take three to five years to resolve. As of 2006, pending court cases totaled about 800,000. The regional trial courts had the biggest backlog of 353,026 cases. But the Supreme Court and other judicial entities and officials are taking steps to speed up the dispensation of justice.

**Corruption** — It is in this area where the Philippines is No. 1 in the world. A World Bank study released in June said that the Philippines is now at the bottom of the list of East Asia's 10 largest economies when it comes to control of corruption, edging out Indonesia which scored the worst in the region in the 2007 survey. The same trend of slackening of control over corruption has been noted in reports of Transparency International, the World Bank and the Switzerland-based Institute for Management Development. The World Bank estimates that the Philippines loses more than \$2 billion (about P88 billion) a year to corruption.

These representative figures should give us a general picture of the state of the nation today. They should provide a counter-balance to the picture painted by Ms Arroyo on Monday. Should these figures make us happy or sad?

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**P.S.**

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