

"Jollibee in Basilan?" and other questions on GMA's SONA

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DAVAO CITY (MindaNews/24 July) — At least 12 of 83 paragraphs of the President's State of the Nation Address talked about Mindanao compared with last year's two out of 40, but this year's SONA was greeted with more jeers than cheers.

Last year, the President boasted that "permanent peace in Mindanao is within reach" and that 80% of the peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had been completed. This year, she was silent on the status of the peace talks but spoke as if peace had been achieved as she focused on "dividends in resources invested in agribusiness, not aggression, to build up, not tear down, the Philippine south." The government and MILF peace panels have yet to agree on the contentious ancestral domain issue. This prompted a Moro NGO leader to say, "great SOAN — State Of Another Nation." Jollibee? Reacting to the President, Amirah Lidasan, vice president of the Suara Bangsamoro Party List asked, "Jollibee in Basilan? Is this President Arroyo's vision of economic progress in the Moro areas or her measurement of peace and order climate in Mindanao?" Lidasan wonders why the President "ignored the Maguindanao issue but boasted about Sulu." The President praised Governor Ben Loong for the "arms to farms" program in Sulu but said nothing about Maguindanao where some 4,500 families were displaced when Governor Datu Andal Ampatuan's armed CVOs (Civilian Volunteers Organization) clashed with elements of the MILF. "The SONA is devoid of any truth about Mindanao and the Bangsamoro areas. She highlighted the US government's role in developing Mindanao- the presence of USAID's Growth and Equity in Mindanao and the US troops in Moro communities is like prying open the Moro communities for the entry of foreign corporations," Lidasan said. "What was President's speech all about? It was an empty speech devoid of any truth and masks the true state of the nation. However, despite of the champions that she invited and the hullabaloo on the infrastructure projects, she cannot deny that she failed to propel the country's economy and make our people safe in this country," Lidasan added. For Prof. Rudy Rodil, vice chair of the government peace panel negotiating with the MILF, the President's SONA had a "positive" impact. "The use of Powerpoint showing what's happening from Luzon to Visayas to Mindanao gives one the impression that she is really talking about the nation," Rodil said. "By citing the people (leaders) who made the developments possible, she shifts the stress from 'her administration' to that of 'the nation.' Overall impact on me is positive. I feel more hopeful," he said. MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal said there was "echo-boasting or busting, obviously to draw in wild applause. Speech dwells on the material in man. She overstated the positive and obviously omitted the true state of the nation." "Great cast" Amina Rasul Council on Islam and Democracy told MindaNews that the President's PR (public relations) people "must be congratulated for the use of a great case of supporting characters — Manny Pacquiao, Governor Ben Loong." On the substance of the SONA, Rasul said on the megaprojects: "Considering the weakness of accountability of her administration, I can see mega corruption." On the Mindanao mega region, Rasul said that for as long as the 1996 peace agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) remains "poorly implemented and the conflict between the MNLF and the government is unresolved, economic development in Sulu, Tawi-tawi and Basilan will be in the backburner." "As long as the conflict between the MILF and her local leaders remain, the peace talks are at risk. As long as human rights are violated to strengthen the security of the state, peace is at risk. How can there be investment, economic progress if there is no just peace? How can economic development and progress take place if investments in human resource development, especially the education of our young, is not as much a priority as megaroads and airports? Lastly, what is our basis for believing her mega promises?" Rasul said it was a "great SOAN — State Of Another Nation." A den of sycophants Lawyer Carlos Isagani Zarate, secretary general of the Union of Peoples' Lawyers in Mindanao, said, "nah, wa ko naminaw! Hohum… may bag-o ba diay?" (Nah, I didn't listen! Hohum… is there something new?) Lawyer Beverly Musni, also of UPLM and convenor of Initiatives for Peace in Mindanao (InPeace Mindanao), said the President's SONA "deserves no comment at all, positive or negative. A comment indicates an interest and what she says is the least of my concern under the present economic and political climate. Magka-heart failure lang ako (I might have a heart failure). Father Eliseo Mercado, Jr., OMI, said he waited for the SONA "with an open mind" but "I lasted only for less than five minutes. I could not believe the following: 1. Motherhood statements...

2. But the worst was the people applauding the zarsuela at every sentence... I could not believe it... how Congress was reduced to a den of sycophants... The usual label, 'den of thieves' is bad... but a den of sycophants... is simply beyond me!

"Unprecedented change" At least twelve of the 83-paragraph speech Mindanao. "Mindanao is our priority for agribusiness investments in the south. Mindanao is mostly fertile and largely typhoon-free, exporting coconut products and high value crops, and from its waters come 40% of the country's fish catch. Our investment priorities mirror those for North Luzon, and more because Mindanao has the poorest regions and poorest provinces and because we have to spend on a logistics system linking it to the north," the President said. Koronadal mayor Fernando Miguel foresees an unprecedented change in Mindanao's economic landscape as he hailed President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's commitment to reinforce Mindanao's socio-economic and development gains with more "realistic" policies and programs. Miguel, chair of Region 12 or Southwestern Mindanao's Regional Development Council (RDC), said the President's commitments and plans for

the island outlined in her state of the nation address (SONA) this afternoon specifically accelerates the region's development thrusts. "Being mainly an agricultural area, we will directly benefit from the government's move to enhance agribusiness investments in Mindanao," the mayor said. "Technocrat's speech," Alfred Hebrona, Jr., private sector representative of Sarangani province in the RDC, said, "although it tells about real advantages in the economic landscape, it was very partisan and leaves no room for any reconciliation and unity which she emphasized in the previous SONA." He said the present political intramurals will likely continue as the President's SONA did not propose a way out. "It was a technocrat's speech, not one from a national leader," Hebrona added. Eliezer Billanes, secretary general of the Soccsksargen Alliance for Genuine Development, said the President's SONA revealed its real agenda against those opposing her "illegitimate" government. "For me it was all about her hunger for the blood of the militant activists and her desire to remain in power through Charter change," he said. Billanes also scored the President's "glorifications" of Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan, who has been repeatedly accused by human rights groups as the mastermind in the string of killings of leftist leaders in Eastern Visayas, Mindoro and Central Luzon since last year. Rona Dawang, who watched the President's SONA while waiting for her turn to pay her telephone bills at a lounge of local telephone company here, asked: "What's there for us here in South Cotabato? She only mentioned Pacquiao and Davao so I guess that shows what we should expect from her," she said. Bernard Francisco, council member of barangay Sta. Cruz, said there was nothing significant in the President's SONA but empty promises.

"The figures she mentioned may have changed but the rhetorics was the same," he said. "What infrastructure Serra, chair of the Mindanao Business Council (MinBC) said President Arroyo drew out clear and detailed plans for infrastructure in Northern Luzon, Metro Manila, and the Visayas "but she could only boast of road networks (in Mindanao) that had long been there." "What more infrastructure did she detail for Mindanao?" he asked. "We simply got lost in the way."

Serra also noted that the President "unfairly projected Mindanao as if it is the only region having peace and order problem."

Earlier in the day, Serra told reporters they were pessimistic about Arroyo's proposed super regions "because it might only siphon funds that are supposed to be for infrastructure in Mindanao".

"The super regions might not add, but siphon the strength of Mindanao in economic development if no affirmative action, specifically in infrastructure, would be implemented," he said. (Carolyn O. Arguillas, Allen V. Estabillo and Walter I. Balane/MindaNews)