

'Strong, unified political voice in U.S.'

Written by EDMUND M. SILVESTRE
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Philippine ambassador to the U.S. Jose L. Cuisia, Jr. (r.), with Consul General Mario de Leon, Jr. (c.) and Consul Elena Maningat, talks to members of the Fil-Am media at the Philippine Center boardroom in New York on May 18. (Filipino Reporter photo)

A relaxed, friendly and insightful Jose L. Cuisia, Jr., the new Philippine envoy to Washington, faced the Fil-Am media early Wednesday night at the boardroom of the Philippine Center on Fifth Avenue, an hour before he addressed the Fil-Am community at the Kalayaan Hall in his first New York tri-state appearance.

The former governor of Central Bank of the Philippines gave a no-holds barred chat and suggests he would do what it takes to make things done in the interest of all Filipinos in the U.S. and back home — even if it would require him to sing.

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“Of course I won’t volunteer,” says the 66-year-old Wharton-educated banker and TOYM awardee.

“But if asked, I can sing my favorites, “*Kapantay Ay Langit*” and “My Way.”

He disclosed that he had the chance to meet some years ago the embattled International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief, Dominique Strauss-Kahn of France, when they were both heads of their countries’ Central Bank.

Straus-Kahn is accused by a hotel maid of sexually assaulting her last week at the Sofitel Hotel in Manhattan.

“I got to talk to him, but I didn’t know he’s a woman chaser,” Cuisia shared, drawing chuckles from those present at the boardroom, including Consul General Mario de Leon, Jr. and Consuls Elena Maningat and Zaldy Patron.

But when topics turned more serious, he easily shifted into his no-nonsense statesman stature.

Since succeeding Ambassador Willy Gaa in Washington on April 2, Cuisia said he is focused on his three major work policy for the Aquino Administration and the Filipino people — economic diplomacy that covers trade, investment and tourism; enhancing national security particularly building up the Philippines’ capability in counterterrorism through U.S. military assistance; and ensuring the protection of all Filipino nationals from, among other things, human trafficking.

Cuisia said the Philippines, even before the fall of top terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, has been closely working with the U.S. to beef up national defense on all fronts, including providing extensive trainings for the Filipino military and police.

He cited the Philippines’ recently-acquired vessel, USCG Hamilton, from the U.S. Coast Guard as the latest effort to protect the Philippines’ maritime domain.

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The vessel will be officially known as BRP Gregorio del Pilar, with Captain Alberto Cruz at the helm, with all its Filipino crew now training with the U.S. Coast Guard.

Cuisia also mentioned that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is sending experts to review security in Philippine airports.

He said President Benigno Aquino III handed him a three-page instruction to promote the interests of the Philippines and its people, while strengthening Philippine-American ties.

Foremost of them, he said, is to drum up louder support from the Fil-Am community to help ensure the passage of the H.R. 3039 or the SAVE Our Industries Act in U.S. Congress that will create thousands of jobs for Filipinos and induce hundreds of millions of dollars to Philippine economy.

“At the peak of the apparel industry in the early 2000, as many as 600,000 Filipino workers were employed,” he noted.

“It’s down to 150,000 now. The level of exports of the apparel went up to about \$2.2 billion, and it’s down to just a billion now.”

SAVE Act didn’t pass in the last 111th Congress and the Philippines is hopeful the measure will be refiled in the 112th Congress.

Cuisia said his appeal to the Filipino community — with its over 3 million strength in the U.S. — is to write to their congressmen to support the bill that will revitalize the apparel industry both in the Philippines and the U.S.

“Even if I sound like a broken record, I won’t stop appealing to the Filipino community,” he said.

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“They’ve got to help...they can utilize the SAVE website (<http://saveoutindustriesact.org>), and its Facebook and Twitter interfaces to reach to as many *kababayans* as possible.”

Cuisia, likewise, appealed to all Filipino-Americans to exercise their right to vote in U.S. elections to give the Fil-Am community a stronger political voice.

“Unfortunately, while Filipinos have big numbers in the U.S., they don’t exercise their rights to register and vote,” Cuisia said.

“If you want the Fil-Am vote to be an important force like other ethnic minorities in the U.S., you must register and cast your vote regardless of your party affiliation because congressmen and senators are also monitoring how Filipinos in America vote.”

“If they cannot see the pattern how Fil-Ams vote, then how will they listen and respond to you as a community?” he added.

“*Sayang* because Filipinos have the numbers and also quality...many of Fil-Ams are professionals and achievers. In a recent study in California, it found out that Fil-Ams are among the highest paid in the state.”

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At the reception, Sen. Benigno Aquino III (center) is surrounded by other members of the Philippine Commission on Goodwill.



Sen. Benigno Aquino III (center) is surrounded by other members of the Philippine Commission on Goodwill at the reception.