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## **PALACE DARED TO CLARIFY STATUS OF SECRETARY PUNO**

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr. (PDP-Laban) today dared President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to clarify the status of Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno in view of the talk of the town that he is on the way out.

"It seems that Malacañang has not been forthright about the fate of Secretary Puno. And neither has Puno spoken up about this matter. My suspicion is that the President has lost confidence in Puno and he has to go," Pimentel said.

Pimentel cited circumstances that tend to give credence to a newspaper report that Puno will be replaced by Public Works and Highways Secretary Hermogenes Ebdane as part of a new round of a Cabinet shakeup.

According to the report, other Cabinet members to be affected by the revamp are: Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro will be replaced by Presidential Management Staff head and former armed forces chief of staff chief Hermogenes Esperon; Teodoro will be named secretary of justice; and acting Justice Secretary Agnes Devanadera will revert back as Solicitor General.

Pimentel said the talk about Puno's impending exit was bolstered by the President's decision to designate Ebdane as officer-in-charge of the Department of Interior and Local Government when Puno went on leave a two-week leave of absence.

By rule and practice, Pimentel said the DILG secretary, when he goes on leave, recommends his most senior undersecretary to temporarily take his place. But in this particular case, he said the President bypassed Puno's senior undersecretary and designated Ebdane as OIC of DILG in a concurrent capacity.

"To me, this implies that the President does not trust Secretary Puno anymore," said Pimentel, who once served as DILG secretary.

He said what adds to the puzzle was the statement of Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita that Puno would undergo medical treatment for an ailment that was not disclosed. But this was dismissed as inaccurate by Interior and Local Government Asst. Secretary Brian Yamsuan, who said that Secretary Puno was attending the wedding of his daughter in the US.

"Maybe the time came when the credibility of Secretary Puno, as far as Gloria is concerned, has been gradually lost. The whole world knows that when Joseph Estrada ran for president (in 1998), he was with Erap. Everybody knows that and it was no secret," the senator from Mindanao said during his own talk show program over RMN-DZXL.

"Now, Erap is poised to declare his presidential candidacy. Maybe Gloria is thinking 'the time would come that this man (Puno) may turn against me, it's better to jump the gun on him.' That is just my suspicion but I may be wrong."

Pimentel noted that Puno has been silent on whether he will reassume his DILG post or whether he has been sacked.

The talk that Puno was being replaced came on the heels of his declaration of his intention to run for vice president.

Pimentel said that although Puno is a brilliant man, his loyalty to the incumbent president he is serving is susceptible to doubt because of his identification with Mr. Estrada and before this, to former President Fidel Ramos.

"It seems there is a basis for the speculation that he will be yanked out of his Cabinet post. Or has the ax already fallen on him?" he said.

Pimentel surmised that the 2010 elections, and not the alleged administration to impose martial law, was the real reason behind the rumored Cabinet reshuffle.

In the case of Secretary Teodoro, who plans to run for president in the next elections, Pimentel said the alleged plan to transfer him to the Department of Justice has certain advantages.

He said Teodoro would be able to project himself better as a civilian official aspiring to be president by serving as justice secretary while he is looked upon as part of the military as defense secretary.

"So if all these reports are true, the Cabinet reshuffle is part of the preparations of the administration for 2010. The transfer of Secretary Teodoro to the Department of Justice is possible. He is very qualified for the position. As a lawyer and bar topnotcher, he can act confidently as justice secretary than as secretary of national defense."

Pimentel also opined that since Devanadera is not aspiring to run for national elective post, the Palace believes that she will agree to relinquish the high-profile and powerful post as justice secretary in favor of reassuming her old job as solicitor general.