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Some 120 protesters picket Clark

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Central Luzon Desk

CLARK, PAMPANGA—Around 120 protesters picketed the main gate of the Clark Freeport minutes before President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo delivered the keynote speech at the Philippine Development Forum Wednesday.

Members of the Freedom from Debt Coalition and Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD) hoisted placards and streamers bearing the messages “No aid for illegitimate GMA government,” “Cancel illegitimate debts of illegitimate government,” “No aid for trade,” and “No tied aid.”

The two groups called their protest action an “alternative forum” to the gathering at the Fontana Leisure Park that was attended by representatives of foreign funding institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

But Ms Arroyo did not see this public rebuke. She arrived in Clark by helicopter, skipping the gate located 10 kilometers away.

She walked into the convention center at 12:20 p.m., almost an hour late for the announced 11:30 a.m. engagement.

The protesters, who assembled at the gate at 11:30 a.m., appeared to have surprised authorities.

The main gate, before which some 50 policemen stood, was blocked with barbed wire.

KPD Central Luzon chair Aurora Broquil said the police ordered the protesters to leave at once but that leaders of the two groups managed to negotiate for 30 minutes more so that they could complete their program.

Brig. Gen. Rommel Gomez, chief of the Army’s 703rd Infantry Brigade, said the protesters numbered only 30, and were mostly from the leftist group Akbayan.

Gomez said the picket slowed down traffic to Clark.