

29/5/05

Tony Kwok upbeat in new role coaching Manila's graft busters

Ex-ICAC chief believes Philippines can be clean

Mary Ann Benitez in Manila

The Philippines can be just as successful as Hong Kong in eradicating the worst excesses of corruption, predicts a former Hong Kong anti-graft chief appointed to advise the country's president.

Speaking for the first time about his role as Manila's expert adviser on fighting corruption, retired ICAC operations director Tony Kwok Man-wai said: "My main message is that I am the living testament to the success of Hong Kong in overcoming the huge problem of corruption in the 1970s.

"If it could be done in Hong Kong, it should be equally possible for the Philippines."

He said there had been "some initial success but this is very much the beginning".

Mr Kwok, who retired from the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 2002, accepted an invitation to advise the Philippines' Ombudsman Simeon Marcelo in

2003, with his work funded by international aid agencies. When he discovered weaknesses in the investigation work of the Office of the Ombudsman, the equivalent of the ICAC, Mr Kwok ran training workshops for investigators, and more were hired.

"The body has now been producing lots of successful enforcement results, including the suspension of the deputy commissioner of customs," said Mr Kwok.

The European Commission's Ombudsman Corruption Prevention Project was launched in Manila this month, with Mr Kwok as its external technical expert.

He said he had advised President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo that the most important factor in fighting corruption was political will, and it should not come just from the top. "There should be political will from the cabinet and the heads of government agencies as well."

A presidential workshop for all cabinet members and heads of



Tony Kwok: "living testament"

agencies was held in December, led by Mr Kwok. After the workshop, the agency heads submitted annual anti-corruption work plans.

"I am hoping to see how successfully these plans are ... implemented in 2005," Mr Kwok said.

He also conducted a workshop involving the heads of the three

most important accountability institutions – the Ombudsman, the chairman of the Civil Service Commission and the Commissioner of Audit.

The Philippine Ombudsman has nothing but praise for Mr Kwok. "He is very aggressive, very candid and very generous with his advice. He knows how to listen, and [he] studies. He comes prepared, he knows what he is talking about," said Mr Marcelo.

Hong Kong's success "gives you hope that the problem can be solved. People are saying [corruption] is embedded in our culture and society, there is nothing you can do".

Assistant Ombudsman Cyril Ramos said that when Mr Kwok's assistance was first sought, "he was emphatic in saying that '[Hong Kong's] situation in 1974 was worse than the Philippines, and we were able to win the battle'. So it is not really impossible for the Philippines".