

## BREASTFEEDING OR BUST

# US traders told to keep off RP milk policy

By Philip C. Tubeza

A PARTY-LIST LAWMAKER YESTERDAY chided the influential US Chamber of Commerce for opposing moves to promote breastfeeding by regulating the promotion and advertisements of breast milk substitutes in the country.

Akbayan party-list Rep. Risa Hontiveros scored the US trade group for its "unwanted, unwarranted, and alarming" interference in the multisectoral effort to promote breastfeeding among Filipino mothers.

"The promotion of breastmilk substitutes has undermined breastfeeding as the healthiest and the safest feeding practice for infants and children up to two years old," Hontiveros said in a privilege speech.

She said Thomas Donahue, head of the US Chamber of Commerce, wrote President Macapagal-Arroyo on Aug. 11 and warned her that the proposed ban on advertising and marketing of breast milk substitutes threatened the "country's reputation as a stable and viable destination for investments." The US Chamber of Commerce, which is based in Washington DC, counts Ancham Philippines among its affiliates.

Due to the low rate of breastfeeding in the country, health workers, the Department of Health, and the World Health Organization had been pressing for a revision of the Milk Code to regulate the promotion and advertising of breast milk substitute, she said.

However, Donahue alleged that the DOH's decision to revise the Milk Code's implementing rules and regulations came "without due process or appropriate consultation," she added.

"Mr. Donahue's letter is not only inaccurate—after all, the DOH wants to proscribe the advertising, promotion, sponsorship, and marketing of breast milk substitutes for infants and children up to 2-years-old, and not 3-years-old as he alleges—it is also reflective of the consumerist and profit-oriented mindset of the infant formula industry," Hontiveros said.

"In 2004 alone, the country imported P3 billion worth of infant formula products," she added. She said that came at the expense of public health.

Hontiveros blamed "big foreign pharmaceutical and infant formula companies" for the marginalization of breastmilk, which is deemed by the WHO as the only food for infants and children that can offer numerous unique health advantages.

"Infant formula companies organize so-called mothering classes that ironically extol the alleged advantages of branded formulas. They offer monetary incentives and organize travel tours for health workers to promote their products," Hontiveros said.

She said the WHO discovered that some health center staff members were given P500 per 10 children who were converted to use a particular brand of breastmilk substitutes.

"Barangay health workers, pediatricians, health care professionals get T-shirts, jackets, and other paraphernalia that promote branded breastmilk substitutes," Hontiveros said.

"Promotional items are also ubiquitous in private and public health care facilities. Media advertisements also peddle unsubstantiated and unscientific claims that infant formulas increase the emotional and intelligence quotients of children," she added.