

PHILIPPINE CUSTOMS CHIEF SAYS NO TO GRAFT, YES TO 'REWARDS'.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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MANILA, Nov 4, Reuter - The new customs chief of the Philippines says he frowns on blatant graft but has told his poorly-paid officers they can accept "tokens of appreciation" because they are a part of Filipino culture.

"I am looking at this in a very practical way," retired army General Salvador Mison told Reuters in an interview on Wednesday.

"I don't believe in reducing graft and corruption by catching people. I am in favour of making the system such that it will be hard for them to make some monkey business."

Mison, 55, appointed by President Corazon Aquino as part of a government shake-up in September, said he drew a fine line between bribery and "rewards".

"You try to get the maximum amount due the government and then after that if they give you anything as a token of appreciation it's okay with me, provided it is given without any ulterior motive," he said.

If an importer gave a reward because he received a consignment in 10 days instead of three ... "this is part of our culture, Filipino culture," Mison said.

But customs officers should not to use their low pay as an excuse to extort money. "Don't think that by being in customs you can become an instant millionaire," Mison said.

The new customs chief took several well-publicised steps in his first weeks in office.

He sacked some customs officials, recalled a fleet of impounded BMW and Mercedes Benz limousines that had been "lent" to senior government officials, and announced that he had reduced from 42 to six the number of signatures needed on import documents.

But Mison says the Customs Bureau administers only 45 of the hundreds of ports dotting the Philippines' coastline and that smuggling is hard to stop in an archipelago of 7,100 islands, only 2,773 of which are named.

He has brought in several former military officers as key aides "because they are people I can trust and they are the people who can read my mind." A major-general heads customs intelligence, while a colonel is a special assistant.

Visitors are ushered out of Mison's office by his nephew Ramoncito Mison, who says he practised as a lawyer before his uncle plucked him out of relative anonymity to fill another special assistant's post at customs headquarters in Manila's busy port.

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