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NEW YORK CITY – President Benigno S. Aquino III has made a “great start” in fighting corruption in government after a year in office, the Asia Society said.

Jaime Metzl, Asia Society executive vice president, said corruption continues to be a scourge in the Philippines, but Aquino’s crusade to end it has gained headway since he assumed office last year. Accompanied by a small delegation, the President left Manila on Sunday night for a five-day working visit to New York City and Washington.

The President intends to showcase his anti-corruption program, government transparency efforts, as well as the improved business climate in hopes of attracting more investments to the country.

He was invited by US President Barack Obama and Brazil President Dilma Rousseff to attend the launch of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) summit in New York.

The Asia Society is a global non-profit organization that focuses on educating the world about Asia.

“The first step that needs to be taken is to address corruption, and President Aquino has raised this issue very forcefully, but the system has many elements of corruption, that’s why it will require sustained effort over time,” Metzl said.

“I believe that President Aquino has made a great start in that process, but it will need to be an ongoing process,” he said.

Metzl noted that the Philippines has one of the most talented populations in the world, saying Filipinos are helping build other countries and have become a nation that exists largely on remittances. But he added that the only hindrance for its sustained growth is corruption.

The government also needs to do more in protecting the rights of overseas Filipino workers, especially those in the Middle East.

Last week, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) arrested its former military comptroller, retired Maj. Gen. Carlos Garcia, after President Aquino confirmed his earlier conviction by a court martial.

Metzl said Aquino's trip to the US is an important step into transforming the alliance of the US and the Philippines amid a “very tense situation” particularly with regard to the South China Sea.

“There are concerns in the Philippines as there are in the United States when it comes to China’s claims on the South China Sea and its behavior,” Metzl said. “Both the Philippines and

the United States have a very strong interest in working together to ensure the free and open navigation of the oceans and seas, including those in the South China Sea.”

He said that Filipinos have been a staunch ally of the US in the past, and “we believe that the Philippines and the United States will remain allies” as “they share cultural connections, we have such a strong people to people connection and we have overlapping interest.”

Aquino and Chinese President Hu Jintao earlier agreed to make the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea an area of “friendship and cooperation” and the conflict between the two nations should be resolved peacefully.

Before leaving Manila, the President congratulated Miss Universe third runner-up Shamcey Supsup for bringing honor to the country. The two met briefly at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 2 lounge.

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