

Imelda Marcos denies defrauding state

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The Philippines' main anti-corruption court issued four arrest warrants yesterday against the flamboyant former first lady, Imelda Marcos, on charges of embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars while housing minister in the 1970s.

Lawyers for the widow of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos immediately posted the 30,000 pesos (£400) bail for each charge. Ms Marcos, 72, arrived at the Sandiganbayan anti-graft court in a chauffeured limousine to be fingerprinted.

"Once again this is pure and simple harassment," Ms Marcos, who denies all the charges, told the press. "It is so inhuman. It's a persecution of 16 years. So relentless, so cruel."

The warrants are for four separate charges of maintaining Swiss bank accounts with money Ms Marcos and her husband allegedly stole during their 21 years in power. They fled into exile after a popular revolt in 1986. The amounts were far more than the Marcoses' "lawful income of \$945,487.75" for the years 1965 to 1985, the charge said.

Court documents released yesterday allege that Ms Marcos set up the accounts while housing minister in the early 1970s "for the benefit of the accused and her late husband, then-president Ferdinand Marcos and their children, with monies amounting to \$231,366,894 (£160m at today's exchange rate) as of 31 December 1989".

Local media said the charges could involve up to \$600m (about £414m).

Ms Marcos faces between 10 and 17 years in prison if convicted. No date has been set for the trial.

"I have no foundations. Stop using the resources of government and using up the energy of everybody for this witch-hunting," she said.

Swiss banking authorities have already turned over more than \$500m to the Philippine authorities.

Ms Marcos, famous for her 1,200 pairs of shoes that the Manila mob found when it invaded the presidential palace in 1986, fled with her husband to Hawaii where he died three years later.

She returned from exile in 1991 after a ban was lifted. Two years later she was convicted of corruption and sentenced to 12 years in prison. An appeal court overturned the conviction in 1998.

No one knows how much wealth the Marcoses amassed while in power. Some Filipinos claim it is up to £9bn.

More than 100 criminal and civil suits prosecutors filed against the couple in the early 1990s have become almost moribund because of delaying tactics by the Marcos legal team.