

60,000 MT of fish imports approved for typhoon-hit areas

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it authorized imports of 60,000 metric tons (MT) of frozen small pelagic fish in the first quarter to augment supply in areas hit by Typhoon Odette (international name: Rai).

“The National Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Council (NFARMC) said we have more than enough supply but based on data from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), we have a potential deficit

this quarter of about 119,000 MT,” Secretary William D. Dar said in a televised briefing.

“We cannot just say that the fishing sector will continue to be normal. They are the number one sub-sector hit by typhoon. The capacity of our fishers to catch will be in question,” Mr. Dar added.

Damage to the fisheries sector due to Odette was estimated at P3.97 billion, or 29.81% of total agricultural losses, according to the DA.

Mr. Dar cited inflation, logistics problems, and high prices as the other reasons for the need to import.

“By the end of the day, having considered everything, NFARMC is a body that has the recommendatory responsibility, but we (the DA) take responsibility in terms of ensuring food security. In this case, importing small pelagic fishes,” Mr. Dar said. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**

Grid operator sees potential yellow alerts during elections

THE National Grid Corp. of the Philippines (NGCP) said on Tuesday that it expects power supplies to be thin during the dry season due to increased demand, possibly affecting the national elections in May.

The grid operator said in a statement that due to the unpredictability of outages, it cannot assure adequate supply even though its maintenance schedule planning scheme, known as the Grid Operating and Maintenance Program (GOMP), is showing no periods in which outages are expected.

The GOMP, which was approved by the Department of Energy (DoE) on Jan. 10, consolidates the preventive maintenance schedules of power plants, indicating how much power will be rendered inaccessible on the maintenance days.

“We have coordinated with the generation and distribution sectors so that we could optimize and rationalize our own maintenance schedules, to ensure sufficiency, at least on paper, of power supply throughout the year,” the NGCP said.

But while the GOMP gave no indication of thinning reserves, yellow alerts were raised over the Luzon grid this month after the power supply failed to meet the transmission grid’s regulating and contingency reserve minimums.

“On paper, there appears to be sufficient supply to meet demand; but the plan on paper, the GOMP, is not always followed. It is when there are unscheduled shutdowns and derations, and extensions of maintenance duration, that grid operations may be disrupted enough to warrant the issuance of a grid alert status,” the NGCP said.

According to the NGCP, the DoE forecast peak demand of 12,387 megawatts (MW) for Luzon to take place in the last week of May, 747 MW higher than the actual 2021 peak of 11,640 MW which occurred on May 28, 2021.

The Luzon grid peaked at 11,344 MW on June 21, 2019 and 11,103 MW on March 1, 2020.

The Visayas grid is expected to peak at 2,528 MW, up from the 2,252 MW peak recorded on Dec. 13, 2021, while the Mindanao grid is expected to peak at 2,223 MW, against the 2,144 MW peak on Aug. 4, 2021.

“As the transmission service provider, we can only give an overview of the current supply and demand situation, and endeavor to dispatch any and all available grid resources. It cannot intervene on matters concerning power generation,” the NGCP said.

Although the yellow alert issued earlier was just a warning, a red alert can also be issued when demand exceeds supply, which will force the grid to ration power.

The NGCP issued red alerts between May 31 and June 2 last year as unplanned maintenance shutdowns and the derating of power plant output led to rotational brownouts.

The grid company said legislators must enact demand-side measures to head off future power issues in the coming months, particularly during election season in May.

Energy Undersecretary Felix William B. Fuentebella on Tuesday said at a news conference to discuss the restoration of power in areas hit by Typhoon Odette the department will focus on addressing concerns about the dry-season peak next. — **Marielle C. Luceno**

China rail consortium signs PNR contract for South Long-Haul line

THE Department of Transportation (DoTr) and a contractor from China recently signed a contract for the first package of the Philippine National Railways (PNR) South Long-Haul Project, the Chinese Embassy in Manila said on Tuesday.

“One of the world’s largest railway contractors from China has signed with DoTr the commercial contract for PNR South Long-Haul Project DB (Package 1) yesterday (Jan. 17),” Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian said in a statement posted on his official Facebook page.

“The \$2.8-billion railway, one of the flagship projects under President (Rodrigo R.) Duterte’s ‘Build, Build, Build’ program, is so far the highest-funded G-to-G (government-to-government) project between our two countries,” he added.

The Transportation department said in November that only the joint venture of China Railway Group Ltd., China Railway Number 3 Engineering Co. Ltd., and China Railway Engineering Consulting Group Consor-

tium Ltd. had qualified out of three bidders for a P141.79-billion contract for the design and construction of a 380-kilometer railway in the Bicol Region.

The contract covers the first package of the PNR South Long-Haul Project, or PNR Bicol, from Banlic in Calamba, Laguna to Daraga, Albay.

“It will shorten the travel time from 12 hours currently to four hours only,” Mr. Huang said. “It will serve up to 14.6 million passengers per year after (it enters operations).”

The project is also expected to create over 10,000 direct jobs each year and “hundreds of thousands of jobs in related areas by driving economic growth along the line.”

The entire PNR Bicol project consists of a 560-kilometer long-haul rail line connecting Metro Manila to provinces in Southern Luzon.

A segment of the project between San Pablo, Laguna and Pagbilao, Quezon is expected to start operations in the second quarter.

The project is expected to be fully operational by 2025. — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

ILO sees 2022 PHL jobless at 1.1 million, warns unemployment picture understated

By Alyssa Nicole O. Tan
Reporter

THE International Labour Organization (ILO) projected Philippine unemployment numbers at 1.1 million in 2022, about 10% higher than pre-pandemic levels, but warned that unemployment data may undercount the extent to which people exited the work force during the public health crisis.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic triggered “a large exit from the labor force, which does not count as unemployed,” according to Khalid Hassan, director of the ILO Philippine country office.

In an e-mail on Tuesday, Mr. Khalid added: “The employment impact is much larger than what unemployment shows.” “We now expect people to be returning at a slower pace, as we see the labor force numbers gradually increasing from... 42 million in 2020 to 45.9 million in 2022 and 47.4 million in 2023,” he added. The rate at which workers exit the labor force may be diminishing as workers become less afraid of the pandemic.

Women, however, will continue to be burdened by the additional home duties needed during the crisis, with the result that the disproportionate impact on women will persist, he said.

Kilusang Mayo Uno Chairman Elmer Labog called the ILO projection “actually a quite generous estimate... because the reality on the ground is very different.”

In an e-mail to *BusinessWorld*, Mr. Labog, a Senate candidate, said employment data do not reflect many who are either unpaid for their work or self-employed.

“This is not a good sign that the economy is recovering despite what the Duterte administration says. There is no real job creation. People are just making do with what employment opportunities are there — and this is not a way to make a decent living,” Mr. Labog said.

He noted the absence of any industry that can accommodate the growing workforce and prevailing anti-worker policies such as low wages, contractualization, and the non-recognition of union rights.

He also said the government has not put in place safety nets for the unemployed. “We’ve seen how disastrous this has been when millions were thrown (out of work) ... without any aid or support from the government.”

Partido Manggagawa Chairman Rene Magtubo told *BusinessWorld* in a text message that ILO’s estimates are likely on the low side.

The Philippine Statistics Authority’s labor force survey estimated unemployed numbers in November 2021 at 3.16 million, he said, “and given that no robust economic recovery program is being implemented by the present administration this year, I don’t think that the number of unemployed persons in 2022 will settle down to the 1.1 million level as estimated by the ILO.”

Mr. Magtubo said 2022 is an election year, with the winner’s programs not

likely to kick in until the new government settles in by “the end of the year.”

Associated Labor Union Spokesperson Alan A. Tanjusay told *BusinessWorld* in a Viber message that the outcome of the 2022 national and local elections is nevertheless expected to have a major impact on employment, if the right priorities for job creation are pursued.

“A questionable election result, wrong choice of executive government leaders and wrong government priorities will definitely discourage job creators,” he added.

Mr. Tanjusay also noted that the vaccination rate will determine the resilience of the workforce and businesses as COVID-19 evolves. “... An inadequate vaccination rate will sink the economy again (due to) the possibility of an attack of a more powerful COVID-19 variant.”

“Labor markets remain a long way from recovery not just in the Philippines but also in many countries. Challenges related to underemployment, poverty, and a lack of decent work, remain greater than they were before COVID-19 hit,” Mr. Hassan said.

In a separate statement, the ILO noted that its “most negative” labor market outlooks were for Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, while the recovery is expected to be strongest in high-income countries.

The recovery outlook in 2022 was dimmed by the impact of new coronavirus variants, specifically Delta and Omicron, and the uncertainty brought about by the prolonged pandemic, it said.

The projected deficit in hours worked globally is the equivalent of 52 million full-time jobs, higher than the previous full-year estimate made in May of 26 million.

“This latest projection... remains almost 2% below the number of global hours worked pre-pandemic,” according to the ILO World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2022 report.

According to the report, global unemployment is expected to remain above pre-COVID-19 levels until at least 2023. The number of jobless in 2022 is estimated at 207 million, higher than the 186 million in 2019.

“Two years into this crisis, the outlook remains fragile and the path to recovery is slow and uncertain,” ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said in the statement. “We are already seeing potentially lasting damage to labor markets, along with concerning increases in poverty and inequality.”

“Many workers are being required to shift to new types of work — for example in response to the prolonged slump in international travel and tourism,” he added. This damage is likely to require years to repair with potential long-term consequences for labor force participation, household incomes, and social and political cohesion.

“There can be no real recovery from this pandemic without a broad-based labor market recovery,” Mr. Ryder said, “and to be sustainable, this recovery must be based on the principles of decent work — including health and safety, equity, social protection and social dialogue.”

BoC sets auction of seized cars for Jan. 24

THE Bureau of Customs (BoC) will once more put up for auction seized luxury vehicles, following the failure of the first-round auction to attract bids in December.

The BoC, in a notice, on Tuesday said it has scheduled another public auction on Jan. 24, with the floor prices for the vehicles set at a combined P29 million.

It will auction off five used vehicles it seized in May and June — a 2008 Ferrari Scuderia 430, a 2001 Porsche Boxster, a 2001 Mercedes Benz SLK350, a 2001 Mercedes Benz SLK55, and a 2011 Mercedes Benz E220.

The BoC usually destroys smuggled cars, including 21 vehicles worth P58.55 million in June.

Finance Secretary Carlos G. Dominguez III directed Customs to put

the cars up for auction last year. The government formed an interagency auction committee composed of the Treasury, Customs, and the Land Bank of the Philippines.

Individuals, sole proprietorships, partnerships and corporations are eligible to participate in the auction on Jan. 24.

The auction process will involve a “hybrid” submission of bids.

“The qualified bidder shall fill up an electronic bid tender form at the auction venue. The electronic form will be accessed securely (from) a computer onsite,” according to the notice.

“The entries made in the form will be tabulated in an array that will be visible to all participating parties.” — **Jenina P. Ibañez**

Customs crackdown results in transfer of over 700 staff

OVER 700 Customs employees were transferred in 2021 following an anti-corruption campaign, the Bureau of Customs said.

The bureau said on Tuesday that it issued over a thousand show-cause orders last year to its staff, who were made to explain why they should not be charged with alleged violations.

The bureau’s investigation service conducted over a hundred personnel investigations, while the bureau sent over a dozen cases to the National Bureau of Investigation and the Office of the Ombudsman.

As a result, the bureau dismissed three employees and suspended 17 over the course of the year. Another 19 were relieved from their posts but remain in active service.

While six were reprimanded, 721 were transferred to other offices and ports.

The bureau said the employees were sanctioned due to “irregular and unlawful activities,” including corruption and violations of customs rules.

The bureau said in a statement that it has been rolling out anti-corruption initiatives, creating committees guided by the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission.

“The initiatives include the signing of the manifesto against corruption by all officials and personnel of the bureau on March 30, 2021,” the bureau said.

The Senate has been conducting an inquiry into the smuggling of farm produce, with Senate President Vicente C. Sotto III alleging corrupt practices by Customs personnel. — **Jenina P. Ibañez**

PHL, France sign dairy cooperation agreement

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it signed a joint declaration with France to develop the Philippine dairy sector.

In a statement, the DA said on Tuesday that the agreement will “facilitate the linking of dairy producers and associations; agricultural and agri-food companies; and importers and distributors of the two countries and encourage them to find opportunities for partnership and commercial collaboration.”

Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar and French Ambassador Michèle Bocoz signed the declaration via video link on Jan. 17.

Upcoming initiatives include the implementation of a pilot project for the development of the dairy sector and an official visit to France for the benchmarking exercise, which will take note of best practices that may be adapted for use in the Philippines.

Mr. Dar also asked for French help in containing African Swine Fever, which has depleted the domestic hog population and raised prices, causing inflation to exceed government targets. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**