

NEDA backs move to relaxed quarantine setting by March

SOCIOECONOMIC Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick T. Chua wants a shift to the least strict form of quarantine by March, which he said would add P11.2 billion to the economy each week.

National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) estimates indicate that a move from Alert Level 2 to Alert Level 1 would add 191,000 jobs per week.

"If we continue to work together and see Alert Level 1, hopefully by the next month, then we would have added P11.2 billion in gross value added per week in the NCR Plus area," Mr. Chua said in

a Management Association of the Philippines economic briefing on Thursday.

Metro Manila, Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, and Rizal were placed under Alert Level 3 last month due to an Omicron-driven surge in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases after the holidays. Economic managers said this resulted in P3 billion in productivity losses each week.

In response to the current Alert Level 2 quarantine, Presidential Adviser for Entrepreneurship Jose Ma. A. Concepcion has also been asking the govern-

ment to move to the least strict quarantine setting by March to restore economic activity.

The COVID-19 daily tally hit 4,575 on Thursday, bringing the active case count to 93,307.

Along with restoring economic activity, Mr. Chua has been supporting a return to face-to-face classes.

"Our thinking in NEDA is we will not get it right at the start, but it is crucial to pilot immediately (in) more schools so that we learn from the pilot," he said. "The more we pilot, the more we will learn, the more we can get it right."

The unavailability of physical classes could worsen the quality of education and cost the country P11 trillion in lost wages over the next four decades, NEDA has estimated.

"Learning was compromised by the prolonged school closure," Brain Trust, Inc. Chair Cielito F. Habito said at the same event.

"Children of poor families in remote areas actually had no access... and therefore were left out of this remote learning exercise, and so the effect of these last years will be felt years from now in terms of reduced worker productivity." — **Jenina P. Ibañez**

PEZA seeking to extend remote-work BPO scheme to September

THE Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) said it wants to allow information technology-business process outsourcing (IT-BPO) companies to continue with 90% work-from-home schemes until September, extending a previous arrangement that expires in March.

In a statement on Thursday, PEZA asked the Fiscal Incentives Review Board (FIRB) to allow IT-BPO firms to operate under work-from-home (WFH) arrangements until Sept. 12.

Economic zone locators' incentives are tied up in performing work onsite, because areas outside the zone are considered a separate Customs territory. The pandemic has led to a reduction to the onsite work requirement to 10%.

Charito B. Plaza, PEZA director general, said the agency's proposal is temporary. She added that the PEZA Board approved the proposal on Jan. 7.

"The approval of the PEZA Board of our proposed temporary measure was submitted to the FIRB for further approval as required under the rules. We have yet to receive formal notice on the FIRB's decision regarding our recommendation," Ms. Plaza said.

In September last year, FIRB released Resolution No. 19-21 which allows outsourcing firms in economic zones (ecozones) to conduct up to 90% of work remotely, with no diminution in their fiscal incentives until the end of March.

According to PEZA, such an extension has legal sanction from Rule 23, Section 3 of the implement-

ing rules of Republic Act No. 11534 or the Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE) law.

"Rule 23... provides that an investment promotion agency (IPA) may implement temporary measures to support the recovery of registered business enterprises (RBEs) from exceptional circumstances, upon prior approval of the FIRB," PEZA said.

"Exceptional circumstances include pandemic, epidemic, war, armed conflict, state of national health emergency, outbreak of diseases, international or regional financial crises, major disasters such as a volcanic eruption, earthquake and super typhoon, or analogous circumstances," it added.

PEZA is also appealing for the non-imposition of penalties under FIRB Resolution No. 19-21.

"PEZA-registered companies are coping with or recovering from the impact of the pandemic. If it's supposed to be a relief measure, we should not penalize the companies; rather, we must continue to assist our registered companies as much as possible given that protecting livelihoods of millions of Filipinos is an important national interest," Ms. Plaza said.

PEZA asked its board to allow the transfer of IT equipment and assets as long as these are covered by surety bonds and appropriate permits.

PEZA also requested its board to approve the issuance of guidelines for WFH arrangements.

Separately, PEZA and the Board of Investments said they support Senate Bill No. 2306 filed by Senator Maria Imelda Josefa R. Marcos, which seeks to amend Section 309 of the CREATE law.

The bill cites the need for amendments because Section 309 only allows CREATE incentives to be awarded to activities conducted within economic zones.

"However, instead of the 50% WFH arrangement which is based on revenue, both IPAs agreed that the percentage should be addressed in the proposed Strategic Investment Priorities Plan (SIPP) as the allowable threshold may even be increased to more than 50% but this time, it shall be based on total workforce or manpower of the IT enterprises instead of the revenue," Ms. Plaza said.

The FIRB denied a PEZA request to allow remote work equivalent to up to 90% of an outsourcing firm's revenue. It also stood by its decision to allow outsourcing firms operating within economic zones to maintain WFH arrangements until March as long as 10% of employees are on site.

PEZA said there were 297 registered IT parks and centers and 1,273 registered IT-BPO companies as of November.

"These companies and ecozones have contributed a total of 12.33% or P328.559 billion worth of investments, generated \$11.537 billion worth of exports, and created 962,304 direct jobs as of September 2021," PEZA said. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

IATA calls for more PHL action to restore air travel confidence, revive airline industry

THE International Air Transport Association (IATA) said it is optimistic about the Philippine government's move to open its borders to fully vaccinated foreign travelers, but added that more measures are needed to boost passenger confidence in air travel.

"It is good for the aviation community, and will facilitate the recovery of the aviation industry and the tourism sector. We urge other Asia-Pacific governments to look at similarly easing their travel restrictions and join this growing momentum we are seeing in the region during the past several weeks," Philip Goh, IATA's regional vice-president for Asia Pacific, said in a statement on Wednesday.

Beginning Feb. 10, Philippine borders were opened to fully vaccinated travelers from countries whose citizens enjoy 30-day visa-free entry privileges.

Mr. Goh noted that easing travel restrictions is a "positive step" forward, but "more needs to be done in order to build greater confidence in air travel."

"We urge the Philippine government to take the following additional actions: make permanent the standardization of measures and exemption of quarantine, improving from the current temporary suspension; accept antigen tests for pre-departure testing; recognize digital vaccination certificates and testing certificates that are

presented on digital platforms, such as the IATA Travel Pass," he said.

"It is through greater liberalization from air travel restrictions that aviation and travel businesses, and indeed economies, can advance to full recovery from two years of extreme hardship," he added.


Flag carrier Philippine Airlines, Inc. said fully vaccinated foreigners will no longer be required to undergo quarantine at a designated facility.

"Instead, they shall self-monitor for any signs or symptoms for seven days, with the first day being the date of arrival, and shall be required to report to the local government unit upon the manifestation of symptoms, if any," it said in a statement.

PAL also said that unvaccinated foreign children below 12 years, traveling with a Filipino parent, will need to observe the entry, testing, and quarantine protocols.

"Foreign children from ages 12 to 17 years of age traveling with their Filipino parent, shall follow the protocols based on their vaccination status (i.e., vaccinated or unvaccinated). If the child is unvaccinated, either parent should accompany the child during their facility based quarantine," the flag carrier added.

The airline is currently flying to and from 33 international and 27 domestic destinations. — **Arjay L. Balinbin**



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SUNDAY TO MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13 – 14, 2022	<p>CAVITE (GEN. TRIAS CITY)</p> <p>BETWEEN 4:00AM AND 5:00AM (SUN., 02/13/22) AND THEN BETWEEN 3:00AM AND 4:00AM (MON., 02/14/22) – PORTION OF CIRCUIT AMADEO 62AMA – GATEWAY 62WP – FCIE 65WB - SMC</p> <p>San Miguel – Purefoods Hormel Compound along Governor's Drive in Sitio De Fuego, Bgy. San Francisco.</p> <p>REASON: Relocation of facilities along Crisanto Delos Reyes Ave. in Bgy. Biclatan, Gen. Trias City, Cavite.</p>	<p>REASON: Reconstruction and installation of facilities along Sunrise St. in Bgy. Tambo, Parañaque City.</p>
THURSDAY TO FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17 - 18, 2022	<p>BATANGAS PROVINCE (STO. TOMAS)</p> <p>BETWEEN 10:00PM (THU., 02/17/22) AND 3:00AM (FRI., 02/18/22) – PORTION OF CIRCUIT CALAMBA 413CMB</p> <p>Portion of Maharlika Highway from Calamba Interchange Overpass to South Luzon Expressway (SLEX) Calamba Exit in Bgy. San Rafael.</p> <p>REASON: Replacement of rotten pole and line reconstruction work along Maharlika Highway in Bgy. San Rafael, Sto. Tomas, Batangas Province.</p>	
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2022	<p>QUEZON PROVINCE (CANDELARIA)</p> <p>BETWEEN 9:00AM AND 2:00PM – PORTION OF CIRCUIT SAN PABLO II 426WJ</p> <p>Portion of Masalukot Barangay Road from St. Anthony Subd. to and including Clarisse Subd. and Villa Macaria Subd. in Bgy. Masalukot I.</p> <p>REASON: Installation of facilities in Bgy. Masalukot I, Candelaria, Quezon Province.</p>	
TUESDAY TO WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15 – 16, 2022	<p>MANDALUYONG CITY (HAGDANG BATO ITAAS)</p> <p>BETWEEN 11:30PM (TUE., 02/15/22) AND 4:30AM (WED., 02/16/22) – PORTION OF CIRCUIT NEW ROCKWELL 412VV</p> <p>Portion of A. Bonifacio St. from near Senator Neptali A. Gonzales (Daang Bakal) St. to and including C. F. Sanchez and M. Gonzaga Sts., and Eulogio Rodriguez Elementary School.</p> <p>Portion of C. F. Sanchez from A. Bonifacio St. to and including Eulogio Rodriguez Elementary School.</p> <p>REASON: Line reconductoring work and installation of additional lightning protection devices along A. Bonifacio St. in Bgy. Hagdang Bato Itaas, Mandaluyong City.</p>	
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2022	<p>PARAÑAQUE CITY (TAMBO)</p> <p>BETWEEN 10:00AM AND 3:00PM – PORTION OF CIRCUIT PARAÑAQUE 47ZJ</p> <p>Along Sunrise St. from NAlA Road (MIA Road) to and including Concorde Village.</p>	
FRIDAY TO SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18 - 19, 2022	<p>BATANGAS PROVINCE (STO. TOMAS)</p> <p>BETWEEN 10:00PM (FRI., 02/18/22) AND 3:00AM (SAT., 02/19/22) – PORTION OF CIRCUIT CALAMBA 415CMB</p> <p>Portion of Maharlika Highway near Southern Tagalog Arterial Road (STAR) Tollway – Sto. Tomas Exit in Bgy. San Rafael.</p> <p>REASON: Replacement of pole and line conversion work along Maharlika Highway in Bgy. San Rafael, Sto. Tomas, Batangas.</p>	

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Jobless,
from SI/1

This meant that about seven million employed Filipinos last year are looking for additional work and longer working hours. However, this was more than the 6.4 million and 5.8 million estimated in 2020 and 2019, respectively.

A Filipino worker logged an average of 39.7 hours per week in December, a tad higher than 39.6 hours in November.

Services sector accounted for 56.6% of total employment, lower than the 58.1% share in November. Meanwhile, agriculture and industry's share increased to 25.6% (from 24.5%) and 17.8% (from 17.4%), respectively.

The NEDA said that the net jobs created in December signal that the economy is on the right track to recovery.

"By accelerating the vaccination program and safely reopening more sectors of the economy, we were able to generate more and better jobs for the people," NEDA Director-General and Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick T. Chua was quoted in the statement as saying.

"We look forward to building on these gains in 2022 now that we have contained the spread of Omicron and have reverted back to Alert Level 2 in the National Capital Region and several provinces," Mr. Chua said.

Virus containment and better growth prospects coaxed workers to seek out opportunities, especially with the increased business activity during the holidays, ING Bank N.V. Manila Branch Senior Economist Nicholas Antonio T. Mapa said.

"The increase in net jobs created reminds us of the positive impact of virus containment and reopening," Mr. Mapa said in a note.

The government placed Metro Manila and other provinces under the more relaxed Alert Level 2 starting November 2021, as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases fell.

Meanwhile, Trade Union Congress of the Philippines Spokes-

person Alan A. Tanjusay said the uptick in unemployment in December was due to tighter mobility curbs on the unvaccinated population.

"The coercive 'no vaccine, no ride' policy, and restrictive and prohibitive 'no vaccine, no entry,' and 'no vaccine, no work' policies and the cost of testing on workers also contributed largely to the joblessness in the labor market," Mr. Tanjusay said in an e-mail interview.

Mr. Mapa is still uncertain if the economy will completely recover to pre-pandemic levels as the labor market will "likely to deteriorate" in January, reflecting the impact of Typhoon Odette and the Omicron-driven COVID-19 surge.

"Although we could very well likely see improvements in the job market as early as February, the disruption caused by Omicron and Odette may have sapped some momentum from the recovery process," Mr. Mapa said.

For University of the Philippines School of Labor and Industrial Relations Professor Emily Christi A. Cabegin, the stricter mobility curbs in January likely hampered employment recovery in labor-intensive industries.

"[The movement restriction] will likely lead to higher unemployment and underemployment, as well as lower labor force participation as more people are discouraged from entering the labor force or more workers who lost their jobs withdrew from the labor force altogether," Ms. Cabegin said.

Metro Manila and surrounding provinces returned to stricter Alert Level 3 at the start of the year to combat the Omicron surge. It was reverted to Alert Level 2 in February.

Typhoon Odette (international name: Rai) swept through parts of the Visayas and Mindanao, leaving damage to agriculture and infrastructure worth P13.3 billion and P17.19 billion, respectively, in December last year. — **Mariedel Irish U. Catilogo**