

Blame for GSP+ loss squarely on gov't — NGO

THE looming forfeiture of European trade privileges should not be blamed on European Union (EU) "bullying" but rather on the Philippines' failure to address human rights issues flagged by the bloc, according to Trade Justice Pilipinas, an organization promoting equitable trade.

The potential loss of access to the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) scheme "was conditioned on the Philippines' fulfillment of obligations under 27 Human Rights and Labor Rights conventions. It therefore is clear from the start that in order to continue to benefit from the scheme the Philippine government must abide by its commitment to ensure effective implementation of its human rights and labor rights

obligations," Trade Justice Pilipinas Co-Convener Joseph F. Purugganan said in a statement.

"The blame should not be placed on the European Parliament or any other institution raising concerns over the failure to comply, but should fall squarely on the Duterte administration for not addressing these concerns," he added.

Mr. Purugganan said the EU's flagging of human rights issues should not be framed by the Philippine government as "bullying."

"The program is crystal clear. These special trade preferences, given unilaterally by the EU, are conditioned upon effective implementation of human rights and labor rights conventions. Raising

these human rights concerns on the part of the Parliamentarians should not be seen as bullying but rather an effort to push compliance by the Philippines of conditions it agreed upon in the first place," Mr. Purugganan said.

"The Duterte administration has forfeited these trade preferences by failing to address the worsening human rights situation," he added.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution that highlighted the human

rights situation in the Philippines. It also warned of withdrawing access and privileges enjoyed by the Philippines under GSP+ if the issues are not addressed.

Trade Secretary Ramon M. Lopez said that the Philippines has always responded and complied with the conventions required for GSP+ access.

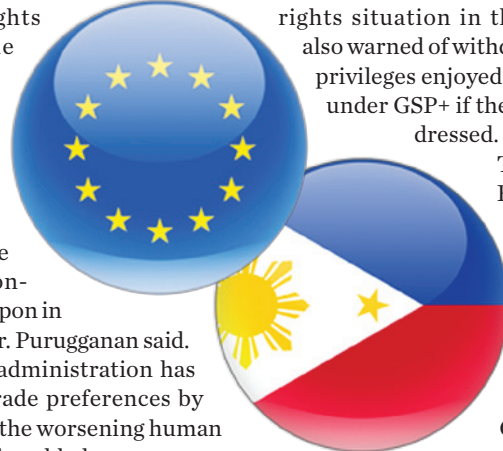
"The Philippines has been very cooperative with the EU and has repeatedly

addressed these concerns in existing dialogue mechanisms. The Philippines remains compliant with the 27 international core conventions on human rights, labor, environment and good governance to enjoy GSP+ treatment," Mr. Lopez said.

Currently, the Philippines still has access to GSP+, a unilateral trade agreement that offers zero-tariff entry for more than 6,200 Philippine products shipped to the EU.

The trade agreement began in Jan. 2014 and is set to expire on Dec. 31, 2023.

Philippine products admissible under GSP+ include tuna, pineapple, bicycles, textiles and garments and footwear. — Revin Mikhael D. Ochave



La Union P4.7-billion bypass 80% complete

THE Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) said on Thursday that a P4.7-billion bypass road project offering an alternate route to the Manila North Road for travelers from Bauang, San Fernando City, and San Juan, La Union is now 80.12% complete.

"A total of P4.697 billion is required to fully complete the whole stretch of the bypass road, of which, P2.026 billion (was) released from 2018 to 2022," the department said in a statement.

"The bypass road project based on total released funds managed to reach an accomplishment rate of 80.12%," it added.

The 22.2-kilometer Bauang-San Fernando City-San Juan Bypass Road project is expected to decongest traffic along the Manila North Road section between Barangay Payocpoc, Bauang and Barangay Taboc, San Juan.

The project, which was started in 2018, has two sections: the 7.8-kilometer Bauang Section and the 14.4-kilometer San Fernando City-San Juan Section.

It is also expected to serve as a link to other major roads such as the Bauang-Baguio Road, San Fernando-Bagulin Road and San Juan-San Gabriel Road that lead to Kapangan, Benguet.

The department said the project includes the construction of 18 bridges, with three already completed, one under construction, and 14 more awaiting funding.

"We understand that a properly-realized road network plays a vital role in nation-building. That is why the DPWH vows to continue providing much-needed road infrastructure to promote economic development all over the country," Acting Public Works Secretary Roger G. Mercado said.

For this year, the department said it hopes to open 2.64 kilometers for the Bauang Section, as well as the construction of the Bauang Bypass Bridge spanning 895.9 meters, while simultaneously opening another 1.87 kilometers of road for the San Fernando City-San Juan Section.

"The rest of the bypass road project is already programmed for implementation in 2023 and 2024, with funding earmarked at P2.671 billion," it noted.

"When completed, travel time between the towns of Bauang and San Juan will be cut in half from the current one hour to just 30 minutes," the department added.

— Arjay L. Balinbin



100% adoption eyed for high-yield rice seed

LOCAL GOVERNMENT units (LGUs) are being counted on to ensure 100% adoption of high-yield rice seed this year, funded by the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF)-Seed Program.

In Zambales, the total area planted to traditional seed has been steadily dropping from 16% in 2018, to 5% in 2019 and 0.06% in 2021, according to the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice).

"RCEF greatly contributed to the increase of high-quality seed utilization in our province. We commit to achieve 100% high-quality seed utilization this 2022," Crisostomo R. Rabaca, provincial agriculturist of Zambales, said in a statement.

The RCEF seed program is a six-year initiative to help farmers compete with foreign rice imports, with 42 provinces involved in the rollout of high-yield seed.

PhilRice Executive Director John C. de Leon said the institute is working closely with LGUs, other agencies, seed growers' co-

operatives and associations, and legislators.

"For the second year in a row, our rice farmers (achieved) record production of 19.96 million metric tons of palay (unmilled rice)," he said.

The seed program's impact on overall rice production for the dry and wet seasons in 2021 was estimated at between 15% and 23%, while its impact on production at targeted provinces was about 38% to 59%, PhilRice said.

In the dry season, 1.65 million bags of seed were distributed to more than 600,000 farmers. During the wet season, 1.76 million bags were distributed to more than 700,000 farmers.

The total area planted with RCEF-issued seed was 466,578 hectares in the dry season and 572,203 hectares in the wet season.

The RCEF is a component of Republic Act No. 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law, which sets aside P10 billion a year to increase the productivity of rice farmers. — Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsosn

Power Maintenance Updates by MERALCO ADVISORY. The following are scheduled power interruptions necessary for the regular maintenance and upgrade of our power distribution facilities... Register now to receive FREE texts about our Power Maintenance Schedules! Text MERALCO <space> ON <space> your Service ID Number...