

Pandemic shaved off P3.8-T from PHL economy, NEDA says

THE extent of the economy's losses after nearly two years of the public health crisis was estimated at P3.8 trillion, based on government economic planners' projections for the size of economy had the pandemic not intervened.

"As the economy bounces back, we now have to recover all the losses we experienced in the last two years," Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick T. Chua said in a televised briefing late Monday.

"If not for the pandemic, *dapat tuloy-tuloy 'yung ating growth* (our growth would have been continuous)," and estimated the size of the economy at P25.3 tril-

lion by 2022, stripping out the pandemic's impact.

The agency Mr. Chua heads, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), currently estimates the size of the economy at P21.5 trillion this year.

The P3.8 trillion gap between the two estimates includes P1.3 trillion in lost household income, P2.2 trillion in lost corporate income, and P300 billion in indirect taxes foregone.

The shift to the more relaxed Alert Level 1 quarantine setting, he said, will help speed up the recovery. NEDA estimates that P9.4 billion will be added to the economy each week with the easing of restrictions this month.

The ranks of the unemployed are also expected to fall by about 170,000 over the next quarter.

If the entire Philippines shifts to Alert Level 1, he added, the additional economic activity is valued at P16.5 billion each week.

The employment recovery at the end of last year will likely drive economic growth in 2022 despite the effects of the Omicron variant, First Metro Investment Corp. (FMIC) and University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) said in a joint report on Tuesday.

"A surge in Omicron-variant cases in January notwithstanding, we think growth will accelerate in 2022 specially considering the huge job gains in the fourth

quarter of 2021," FMIC and UA&P in their market call report.

Infrastructure spending will support growth in the first half because election spending bans exclude major projects, the report said.

"Manufacturing will likely continue to robustly expand in the first half, despite the usual slowdown in January after the Christmas holidays."

Meanwhile, Mr. Chua said that the resumption of face-to-face schooling increases economic activity by about P12 billion a week, with services like accommodation, food, and transport for students resuming. — **Jenina P. Ibañez**

Negros Occidental court issues injunction against plan to import 200,000 MT of sugar

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) has been issued a writ of preliminary injunction by a court in Negros Occidental, ordering it to desist from implementing a plan to import 200,000 metric tons (MT) of sugar.

In a six-page decision, Judge Reginald M. Fuentebella of Sagay City's Regional Trial Court (RTC) Branch 73 ordered the maintenance of the status quo prior to the implementation of the import plan. The freeze on the imports applies until the resolution of the case, unless earlier lifted by order of the court.

United Sugar Producers Federation (UNIFED) President Manuel R. Lamata said the decision is a "victory" for sugar producers.

"This decision just affirms that the industry was right and the SRA was wrong," Mr. Lamata said in a statement.

Sugar Order (SO) No. 3 calls for the import of 200,000 MT of standard and bottler's grade refined sugar to serve as a supply buffer in storm-hit regions and to stabilize prices.

"We are not against imports per se, but we have been pushing for proper consultation and a calibrated import program which is beneficial to all and not just for a particular sector," UNIFED Director Joseph Edgar M. Sarrosa said.

Mr. Sarrosa sought the injunction on behalf of the Rural Sugar Planters Association, Inc., a member of UNIFED.

UNIFED has been urging the government to recall the sugar order because of the lack of consultation and poor timing. The order was issued during the milling season, depressing the price obtained by planters from the mills.

"News of SO No. 3 led to a huge drop in sugar prices, prompting us to (seek) a temporary restraining order against it," UNIFED said.

Asked to comment on the court ruling, the SRA said in reply to a query that it has "yet to officially receive any decision from RTC Sagay as to whether a writ of preliminary injunction had been issued on SO No. 3, or the sugar importation program. This legal matter shall be seasonably endorsed to the Office of the Government Corporate Counsel for appropriate action. Meantime, as SRA is precluded from discussing the merits of the pending case, all it could maintain is that the assailed SO is within the mandate of SRA, on the valid grounds as stated in the SO. The SRA shall endeavor to avail of legal remedies to ensure that it adheres to its legal mandates, all for the sake of the sugarcane industry."

Separately, the Philippine Chamber of Food Manufacturers, Inc. (PCFMI) expressed its support for the import order, suggesting a divergence of interests between planters and the food industry.

"Due to the current local shortage of refined sugar that conforms with the quality requirements of food manufacturers, particularly premium and bottler's

grade refined sugar, we join the SRA in its assessment that there is an urgent need for such imports," the PCFMI said in a statement.

"The inability to import refined sugar that meets the quality standards of food manufacturers poses a threat to food security, specifically the continued supply of essential food commodities. Existing sugar stocks for food manufacturing are dwindling, and therefore imports under the circumstances are necessary," it added.

At the House of Representatives, Deputy Speaker and Negros Occidental Rep. Arnulfo A. Teves, Jr. said at a committee hearing on Tuesday the sugar industry was not adequately consulted on the import order.

"First of all, I'd like to say that what (SRA Administrator Hermenegildo R.) Serafica said about stakeholders not knowing the intricacies of business was insulting. I'm also a stakeholder. I grew up on sugar," he said in Filipino in an online committee hearing. "One more thing, it is a lie to say that all stakeholders agreed. I did not agree. He could say that most stakeholders agreed, but not all. So, he's wrong."

Mr. Teves also asked why the SRA was not addressing high fertilizer and fuel costs.

"If they are really looking at the big picture, why are they so focused on imports? Why are they not looking at importing cheap fertilizer? And having cheaper fuel?" he said. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsen, Jaspearl Emerald G. Tan**

No change in country's gender equality score in past year, says WB

By **Jenina P. Ibañez**
Senior Reporter

LEGAL and economic gender equality in the Philippines registered no changes over the past year on metrics such as rights concerning parenthood, marriage, and assets, the World Bank (WB) said in a report.

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) 2022 report, which identifies the laws and regulations that restrict economic opportunity for women across 190 economies, gave the Philippines a score of 78.8 out of 100, unchanged from 2021. The 2021 score was 81.3.

The Philippine score exceeded the global average of 76.5 and the East Asia and Pacific average of 71.9.

The WB study uses eight indicators to compute the WBL score: mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets and pensions.

A score of 100 indicates complete legal parity.

The Philippines scored 100 in the workplace, pay, and entrepreneurship indicators, but scored 75 for mobility and pensions.

The Philippine score was 60 in the marriage, parenthood, and assets categories.

"Since October 2020, no country has instituted reforms to address women's rights to divorce and remarry," the WB said.

"Two economies still do not permit legal divorce (Eswatini, the Philippines)."

Eylla Laire M. Gutierrez, a research manager for the Asian Institute of Management, said the report demonstrates the complexity of measuring women's empowerment.

"Empowerment cannot be fully realized by merely providing them economic opportunities, but will also require the improvement of their psychological, social, and political empowerment," she said via Viber.

She said the Philippines' low scores in the marriage, parenthood, and assets indicators show that despite their active economic participation, society's perception of women is still unequal to men.

"With these in mind, improving economic opportunities for women does not simply mean creating jobs for them or increasing the number of women participating economically," she said.

"This also entails a re-examination of the entrenched cultural structures that influence how women participate in economies and how society perceives them."

These cultural structures, she said, includes discrimination based on the gendered division of labor, with women expected to do unpaid domestic and care work.

Among East Asian economies, Hong Kong and Taiwan posted overall scores of 91.9 and 91.3, respectively.

Also beating the Philippines score were Laos (88.1), Timor-Leste (86.3), Mongolia (85), Vietnam (85), South Korea (85), Singapore (82.5), and Cambodia (81.3).

Japan was level with the Philippines, while Thailand (78.1), China (75.6), Indonesia (64.4), Myanmar (58.8), Brunei (52.1), and Malaysia (50) were lower.

Globally, women still have three-quarters the legal rights enjoyed by men, the report concluded.

The most progress seen in the past year were in the parenthood, pay, and workplace indicators, with many focused on protecting against sexual harassment at work, stopping discrimination, and increasing paid leave for new parents.

"While progress has been made, the gap between men's and women's expected lifetime earnings globally is \$172 trillion — nearly two times the world's annual GDP," WB Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships Mari Pangestu said.

BoC February revenue tops P59 billion, beating target

THE Bureau of Customs (BoC) said its revenue in February exceeded its target by over 17%, due mainly to an improved process of valuing goods.

The bureau in a statement on Tuesday said it collected P59.04 billion, 17.4% higher than the target.

Collections in February also exceeded the year-earlier total by over 25%.

Fourteen of the 17 collection districts exceeded their February targets.

The outperformers are the Port of San Fernando, Port of Manila, Manila International Container Port, Batangas, Iloilo, Cebu, Tacloban, Cagayan de Oro, Zamboanga, Davao, Subic, Clark, Aparri, and Limay.

In the year to date, collections amounted to P117.52 billion.

"Aside from this positive performance, the bureau maintained its border security measures against undervaluation, misdeclaration and other forms of technical smuggling, and collect lawful revenues," the BoC said.

In 2021, Customs collected a total of P645.77 billion, 20% higher than the previous year and 4.7% above the bureau's target, as international trade rebounded after the pandemic. — **Jenina P. Ibañez**

Philippine smartphone market shrank in 2021 amid lockdowns, supply pressures

THE Philippine smartphone market contracted 5.6% to 17.8 million units in 2021, with lockdowns dampening buying activity and global supply bottlenecks restricting supply, the International Data Corp. (IDC) said.

"The recurring lockdowns and global supply constraints in the second half of 2021 hampered the market's growth with several vendors struggling to fulfill orders during the holiday season, resulting in low inventories across the channels," the IDC, a market research company for the tech industry, said in a statement on Tuesday.

The IDC said sales in the fourth quarter of 2021 declined 23.3% year on year even as shipments increased 18.4% quarter on quarter.

"The gradual reopening of retail shops resulted in more consumers buying through physical stores," it said.

The IDC expects "double-digit growth" in the smartphone market this year, recovering from a weak second half of 2021, and as supply constraints ease.

Angela Jenny V. Medez, client devices market analyst at IDC Philippines, said the smartphone market's growth this year will be driven by fifth-generation (5G) smartphones,

which accounted for 12.7% of shipments in 2021.

"The share is expected to double in 2022. In addition, aggressive pricing among Chinese vendors has dragged the average price for 5G Android smartphones down from \$471 in 4Q20 (fourth quarter of 2020) to \$386 in 4Q21 (fourth quarter of 2021), with some 5G models priced less than \$200," she added.

The top five smartphone brands in terms shipments to the Philippines last year were realme (3.96 million), OPPO (2.62 million), Transsion (2.47 million), Samsung (2.40 million), and vivo (2.39 million).

Last year, realme had a 22.2% market share in the Philippines, followed by Samsung (15.3%), OPPO (14.7%), Transsion (13.8%), and vivo (13.4%).

"Shipments to retail channels are expected to bounce back in 2022, as foot traffic continues to increase in the shopping malls, where most of the key smartphone stores and kiosks are located in the larger cities. The vendors are expected to restart their retail expansion and open more stores across the country, which had taken a hiatus during the lockdowns," Ms. Medez said. — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

Spot market regulator calls for more RE to minimize power outages

A MORE diverse power mix featuring an increased share of renewable energy (RE) will ensure the stability of the power supply, the governing body of the Wholesale Electricity Spot Market (WESM) said.

At the Philippine Solar PV Energy Virtual Summit last week, Leonido J. Pulido III, the president of the Philippine Electricity Market Corp. (PEMC), said the Philippines cannot continue to rely on conventional generators which are subject to periodic breakdown or maintenance periods.

Conventional power generators are fired by fuel oil, coal, and natural gas.

"We have to look into other sources to augment our supply... through the increased penetration of renewable (RE) sources," he said.

"Institutionalizing effective strategies is imperative for us to fully harness the benefits of these RE resources, which include energy prices and supply stability to power up the Philippine economy in the new normal," he said.

PEMC has partnered with the United Nations Office for Project Services to help implement the

energy transition roadmap and introduce market mechanisms to boost the RE market.

During a virtual economic briefing hosted by the Philippine Embassy in Washington on Feb. 24, Energy Secretary Alfonso G. Cusi said the Philippine Energy Plan 2020-2040, which outlines the strategy for a clean energy transition, "opens up vibrant investment prospects" that have been further enhanced by "bold policies to increase the interest and participation of domestic and international investors."

Mr. Cusi also expressed the government's interest in alternative energy sources and tech-

nologies like modular reactors, hydrogen, and electric vehicles for transport.

The Philippines is expected to add capacity of 7,910.96 megawatts by 2027, with coal-fired plants accounting for 46.68%, natural gas 38.71%, renewable energy 11.39%, and facilities fueled by oil 6.67%, according to DoE data on committed projects from last year.

In 2020, the power mix consisted of 57% coal-fired, 21% RE, 19% natural gas, and 2% oil. — **Marielle C. Lucenio**

Agencies granted power to rule on relevance of info requests

GOVERNMENT agencies have been authorized to determine whether requests for the personal information of public officials are a matter of public concern, the National Privacy Commission (NPC) said.

In a statement on Tuesday, the NPC said Privacy Commissioner John Henry D. Naga signed NPC Advisory No. 2022-01, which hopes to make information requests conform to privacy norms by subjecting them to tests for transparency, legitimacy of purpose, and proportionality. The person whose information is being requested also has the right to be notified of such requests, and to be informed of action taken.

"The advisory aims to strike a balance between the right of the people to information on matters of public concern and the right to privacy of an individual," Mr. Naga said.

"Thus, the advisory recognizes the Filipino people's right to information and the necessity of an open and transparent government, while also giving due consideration and respect to the dignity, safety, and human rights of public officers," he added.

The NPC said every government agency is responsible for personal data under its control or custody.

Section 7 of the advisory defines the coverage of the guidelines to include public officers and individuals under contract of service.

The section also requires that requests have a clear purpose that is not contrary to law, morals, or public policy.

"When evaluating requests, the government agency shall determine whether the information requested is a matter of public concern and whether there is a public purpose to be served that may outweigh the rights and freedoms of the public officer as a data subject," the NPC said.

"If the requested document or information is denied and deemed not of public concern, the requestor must be informed within a reasonable time accompanied by a justification," it added.

The government agency also has the authority to determine whether sensitive personal information is relevant to the purpose of the requesting party.

If deemed irrelevant, the commission said any sensitive personal details can also be redacted.

"Some of these information may include (the) home address of the declarant; details of any unmarried children below 18 years of age living in declarant's household, if any, particularly their names, dates of birth, and ages; signatures of the declarant and co-declarant; and government-issued ID numbers of the declarant and co-declarant," the NPC said.

Permitted for disclosure include titles, business address, and office telephone numbers of the data subject; the classification, salary range, and responsibilities of the position held by the subject; and whether the subject is a current or former employee of a government institution.

"Documents (e.g., Personal Data Sheet or PDS, Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth or SALN) that contain sensitive personal information of the concerned public officer, or his or her family, may be granted if there is a declared, specified, and lawful purpose," the NPC said.

Deputy Privacy Commissioner Leandro Angelo Y. Aguirre said: "We hope that this circular addresses some misconceptions that data privacy and the freedom of information are in conflict with each other. A key mandate of the NPC is to ensure the free flow of information." — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**