

Bill creating council to address labor issues referred to appropriations panel

THE House Committee on Higher and Technical Education referred a measure on Tuesday creating a council to address the skills mismatch in the workforce, underemployment, and unemployment to the Appropriations committee to verify that the resulting initiative can be funded.

House Bill 979, filed by Baguio Rep. Mark O. Go, tasks the council with setting policy and developing programs to address gaps in the labor market.

The council, which will be attached to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), is composed of government, academic, and industry representatives.

Economists have blamed the shortage of in-demand skills for the expected rise in unemployment next year.

"There is no question that job skills mismatch, underemployment, and unemployment are a continuing problem," CHED Chairman Prospero E. De Vera II said at the committee hearing.

He said, however, that CHED may not have the resources to support such a council because of its broad mandate which is not budgeted for.

He said various laws aimed at promoting education are not backed with budgets in the General Appropriations Act.

Cavite Rep. Elpidio Barzaga, Jr. asked CHED to propose a budget for the council.

The Committee on Appropriations will rule on the bill's funding provisions. — **Kyanna Angela Bulan**

Energy outlook for 2023 under review amid volatile gas market

THE PHILIPPINES will have sufficient power until December, though the outlook for 2023 will need to be reviewed because of volatility in the gas market, Energy Secretary Raphael P.M. Lotilla said.

Addressing the Senate Energy committee on Tuesday, Mr. Lotilla said "we have enough power supply only up until the end of this year. But we are reviewing the outlook because we have lost the fuel (for) Ilijan."

In July, the Ilijan gas-fired power plant in Batangas shut down in the absence of fuel from the soon-to-be-depleted Malampaya gas field.

"We are very exposed to the volatility of fuel prices. There are issues involving generation, transmission, and distribution as well," Mr. Lotilla added.

"The reason we are here is the continuous power outages in some areas. The DoE said we have enough power supply, the consumers are sick and tired of the situation," Senator Rafael T. Tulfo said during the hearing.

The hearing, presided over by Mr. Tulfo, was called to address recurring power outages and rotational blackouts, particularly in Mindoro. The provinces of Occidental and Oriental Mindoro are undergoing up to 14 hours of power outages per day.

"There is more than one player in the energy supply chain, it is not only the electric cooperative that is causing the interruption, there is also the generation, and transmission sector," Janeene D. Colingan, the executive director and general manager of the Philippine Rural Electric Cooperatives Association, Inc., said.

Mr. Lotilla said he has tasked Assistant Secretary Mario C. Marasigan in organizing a response with the various agencies involved. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**



DIAGO PH/INSPASH

Agency budget briefings nearing halfway mark

BUDGET BRIEFINGS at the House of Representatives have been conducted by nearly half of the government agencies scheduled to go before the chamber, a senior legislator said.

Marikina Rep. Stella Luz A. Quimbo said at a news conference on Tuesday that "As of yesterday (Monday), 14 out of 34 agencies have briefed Congress regarding their respective budget proposals."

The progress made in the budget briefings puts the House on track to complete its budget bill by around the Sept. 30 recess, she added.

Agencies that have presented their budget proposals include the Development Budget Coordination Committee, Department of Agriculture (DA), and the Department of Energy (DoE).

Ms. Quimbo said discussions with the DA and DoE have revolved around the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Program and the Total Electrification Program, as well as other priority items for 2023 that concern the two departments.

"Almost all (agencies) asked for consideration for the budget proposals they submitted to the (Department of Budget and Management)," she said. "Even if many congressmen support (these proposals), it isn't clear what programs the budget increases will come from."

Ms. Quimbo said that the budget ceiling of P5.268 trillion serves as a hard cap on ambitious funding proposals.

"The absorptive (capacity) of the agencies is a perennial challenge which is why we have to pay close attention to the execution of the budget," she added, noting low budget utilization rates for some agencies.

She said devolution has emerged as a common thread in the proceedings, with "law-makers (showing) concern regarding the capacity of (local government units) to be able to absorb the devolved functions from national agencies, especially with a smaller (National Tax Allotment) compared with last year."

She was referring to the 40% share of National Government revenue that LGUs are allocated, known as the National Tax Allotment (NTA). The NTA is based on the National Government revenue collected three years prior, which means the 2023 NTA will be based on the National Government Revenue from 2020, the first year of the pandemic.

"Congress still stands by its goal of the swift passage of the (General Appropriations Bill) to allow sufficient time for it to exercise its oversight functions," Ms. Quimbo said.

"This way, we can ensure that the agencies will not only use their respective budgets for programs in alignment with the new administration's 8-point socioeconomic agenda but will also be genuinely felt by the Filipino people who will benefit from their programs." — **Matthew Carl L. Montecillo**

PCCI satellite connectivity project close to launch

THE Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) said it will soon launch the first phase of its satellite connectivity project serving remote areas of the Philippines.

In a statement on Tuesday, the PCCI said Perry A. Ferrer, its director for Innovation and Digital Economy and Science and Technology briefed Information and Communications Secretary Ivan John E. Uy on Aug. 12 that the project hopes to establish proof of concept for satellite connectivity.

The PCCI did not specify a date for the actual launch.

"Phase 1 of the proof of concept project will set up internet via satellite in six geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), divided equally among the three main islands of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao," the PCCI said.

The six pilot areas were not disclosed.

Phase two will involve the tasking of a satellite specifically for the Philippines.

Mr. Uy said the current fiber backbone is only good for urban areas, but is inefficient in the islands.

Mr. Uy touted the benefits of connectivity for education, adding that the Department of Information and Communications Technology is working with the Department of Education to develop online learning modules.

Mr. Uy cited the need to promote online banking for rural areas, and to set up online marketplaces servicing small businesses.

PCCI President George T. Barcelon said the organization is "looking at enabling satellite connectivity to ensure that government services and social services such as education, healthcare and skills training will effectively reach the unserved and underserved areas, while also facilitating economic activity in these areas." — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

Senate wants wildlife trade kept in check

SENATORS said the penalties for wildlife trafficking are currently not strong enough to deter the growing trade in wild animal species.

"Penalties have become outdated and mere slaps on the wrist when compared to the severity of wildlife trafficking," Senator Cynthia A. Villarsaid at a hearing on Tuesday.

"The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic made us realize the importance of strengthening the conservation of wildlife. It is the constant exploitation of the wild that raises the risk of zoonotic disease transmissions," she added.

The joint hearing of the committees on Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change; Finance, Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking, and Ways and Means, was called to draft the Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act No. 11898 or the Extended Producer Responsibility Act.

The law contains guidelines on wildlife conservation and protection.

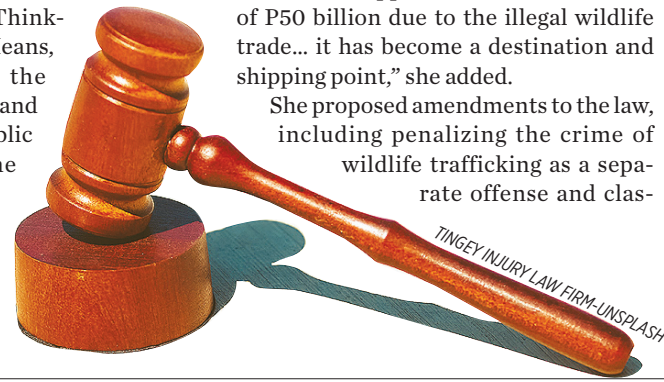
Environment Secretary Maria Antonia Y. Loyzaga said that the current law discouraged wildlife-related crimes to some extent but failed to deter wildlife traffickers "who take advantage of the gaps in the legislation."

"The potential value of wildlife has captured the interest of large organized criminal syndicates. Globalization has created a new platform and deceptive means for illegal wildlife trade at the expense of our country's wildlife resources. This has led to the need to enhance our laws," she said.

Ms. Loyzaga said that the government should pass more stringent laws and increase penalties for criminals.

"The Philippines has suffered a loss of P50 billion due to the illegal wildlife trade... it has become a destination and shipping point," she added.

She proposed amendments to the law, including penalizing the crime of wildlife trafficking as a separate offense and clas-



sifying it as a transnational offense. She also proposed that crimes committed by two or more persons be treated as organized crime.

"It's high time to add the threats to biodiversity like overexploitation. It's also time to make the health of our ecosystem as a priority (around which to) center all our plans and policies," she said.

ASEAN Center for Biodiversity Director Alvin C. Diesmos said controlling the illegal wildlife trade will help mitigate the risk of pandemics.

"We appreciate this timely effort in response to the growing threat of wildlife trade in the region (and) the importance of protecting our wildlife resources to reduce risks of future pandemics," he said.

"Southeast Asia is both a source and transit point for illegally traded wildlife. The Philippines can take the lead in working with ASEAN neighbors," he added.

Forest Management Bureau legal officer Ray Thomas F. Kabigting added that more wildlife protection officers are needed to cover not only animals, but also endangered plants. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**

Fiscal framework resolution stalls on questions about binding provisions

THE SENATE suspended debate on the adoption of a concurrent resolution supporting the National Government's 2022-2028 medium-term fiscal framework (MTFF), with the minority expressing concern that its provisions may be legally binding.

The MTFF calls for the alignment of all economic recovery programs and measures with legislative priorities.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Martin D. Pimentel III, at a plenary session on Tuesday, said the resolution "is a heavy commitment for those who will vote in favor of this... noting that it 'appears to be more than an expression of sentiment but a document which will bind those who sign it and vote for it.'"

Senator Juan Edgardo M. Angara, who chairs the finance committee and is the resolution's primary sponsor, called it "an expression of support" for the government's economic program, "but I don't think it's a legally binding document, meaning I don't think anyone can hold any members of this chamber into account if he wishes not to support any of the measures mentioned here."

Mr. Pimentel had questioned whether voting for Concurrent Resolution 3 automatically binds Senators to vote in favor of the MTFF agenda items and the resulting expenditure.

"In broad terms, we support it. It would mean a support for these measures, but again, once these measures get to the floor, there is no binding effect on our colleagues," Mr. Angara said.

"It would be too much of an expectation on our part because it is just a general fiscal framework," he added. "If that is the case, then we might as well dispense with the debate on these specific measures, but I think we can expect very robust debate on most if not all of these measures going forward."

"Those who vote in favor might disappoint other people in the future if that is the case," Mr. Pimentel said.

Under the resolution, the near-term socio-economic agenda seeks to protect purchasing power while mitigating the scarring effects of the pandemic on families and consumers. It seeks to ensure food security; reduce transport and logistics costs; reduce energy costs to families; tackle health concerns; strengthen social

protection; safely reopen physical classes; make the bureaucracy more efficient through digitalization; and pursue sound fiscal management through tax reforms and improved revenue allocation.

The medium-term socioeconomic agenda, on the other hand, focuses on enhanced job generation, while ensuring better pay and quality of work, as well as sustainability. To achieve this, the executive plans to promote the Philippines as an investment destination; improve infrastructure, enhanced by public-private partnerships; ensure energy security; enhance employability through better-quality education and training opportunities; expand and improve digital infrastructure; encourage research and development and innovation; adopt a "green" and "blue" mindset to managing the economy; and establish liveable and sustainable communities.

"To be clear, the details on how the government intends to pursue these agenda items still needs to be fleshed out," Mr. Angara said. "We hope to get a better picture of the general plan once the PDP 2022-2028 is published by the end of the year," he added, referring to the Philippine Development Plan.

"But while it is good that we keep our heads high up in the clouds, we still need to have our feet firmly planted in the ground — especially in the face of tight government revenue and an economy that is still trying to recover," he added. "This is where the MTFF helps us, by setting the fiscal limits and bounds (within which) we can think about the future of our country."

The Department of Finance has said that the MTFF will serve as the blueprint for reducing the fiscal deficit, promoting fiscal sustainability, and enabling robust economic growth after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MTFF sets the macroeconomic growth targets for the coming years, including 6.5% to 7.5% gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2022 and 6.5% to 8% annual GDP growth from 2023 to 2028, against the 5.71% posted in 2021.

It also seeks to bring the poverty rate to 9% by 2028 from the 18.1% recorded in 2021; lower the National Government deficit to 3% of GDP from the current 6.5%; reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio to under 60% from the current 62.1% by 2025; and make the Philippines an upper middle-income country with a GDP

per capita goal of \$4,256 from the current \$3,643.

Priority legislative measures identified under the MTFF include a value-added tax on digital service providers; the taxation of social media influencers; and excise taxes on single-use plastics. It also asks Congress to pursue the remaining tax reform packages of the previous administration which are the Real Property Valuation and Assessment Reform Act, and the Passive Income and Financial Intermediary Taxation Act.

Mr. Angara said that the MTFF was not "merely symbolic as it is a framework." "Everything we do can be included in this framework, but as to the specific parts... it does not bind us as to what we want to pass."

"To me, we are just committed to the generalities provided here," he added. "There is a buy-in, definitely, but it's more of a moral suasion kind of thing rather than a legal because no one can take us to court... I don't think we are tied in that respect."

The economic managers hope to have the resolution passed before the Senate tackles the national budget, Mr. Angara said. — **Alyssa Nicole O. Tan**