Energy dep't preparing Recto Bank gas contract

THE Department of Energy (DoE) said on Tuesday that it is preparing the service contract covering the resumption of exploration at Recto Bank, which it hopes will help make up for the impending loss of the nearly depleted Malampaya gas field.

"(Regarding) the gas field in Recto Bank, the department is working on the service contract to proceed (with exploratory drilling)," Energy Undersecretary Alessandro O. Sales said during the Philippines LNG and Gas summit.

Recto Bank, also known as Reed Bank, is within the Philippine exclusive economic zone northwest of Palawan, in waters disputed with China.

The Malampaya gas field is the Philippines' only domestic commercial source of natural gas, accounting for 20% of the Philippines' total power requirement.

The Malampaya concession is due to expire in 2024, with output due to fall starting this year until it becomes commercially unviable by 2027.

Mr. Sales said that the department is also looking to discover other indigenous power sources to address a looming energy crisis.

"In terms of renewable energy, the DoE is looking to address its intermittency issues," Mr. Sales said, referring to the unsuitability of many renewables for baseload power, such as wind, which depends on constant gusts, or solar, which cannot generate power at night.

He said intermittency issues can be resolved via liquefied natural gas (LNG), which must be imported.

"LNG will serve as a transition fuel. A transition fuel in this context is low-carbon fuel substance like natural gas," he added.

Mr. Sales said natural gas is projected to overtake coal in the Philippine power mix by 2040.

Laura L. Saguin, head of the DoE's natural gas management division, said that a secure gas supply requires the development of "strategic" infrastructure like LNG receiving terminals.

According to the DoE's Natural Gas Development Plan, it has approved six LNG terminal projects, with operations targeted for between 2023 and 2025. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

PEZA sees Japanese locators continuing to drive ecozone growth

THE Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) said Japanese investors are expected to continue driving growth in the economic zone (ecozone) industry, after they accounted for over P8 billion worth of PEZA-approved foreign direct investment (FDI) in the first eight months.

Tereso O. Panga, PEZA officer-in-charge and deputy director general for policy and planning, said in a Facebook post on Tuesday that more Japanese investors are expected in the Philippines despite headwinds in the global economy.

"Given the current 27.2% share of Japan in the total ecozone foreign direct investment and the steady increase/share of Japanese ecozone investment... we remain bullish that the Japanese will continue to be our number one investor in PEZA not only this year but for many years to come," Mr. Panga said.

In a separate Viber message, Mr. Panga said that the P31.129 billion worth of investments approved by PEZA in the first eight months represents a big jump from the seven-month total of P22.489 billion.

Mr. Panga said in his Facebook post that the other sources of growth are new ecozone development projects involving Japanese equity, which are awaiting Presidential proclamations of eligibility for tax incentives; and the expansion of current Japanese ecozone locators in the chemicals, automotive and automotive parts, computer and optical products, and transport and logistics industries.

"PEZA will soon approve and register four big-ticket projects of Japanese industrial giants (in industries like) multilayer ceramic capacitor, brushless DC motors, and biomass carbonization," Mr. Panga said.

"I got this assurance on continued robustness of Japanese FDI inflows into the Philippines from my recent meetings with the top executives of the Japanese Embassy in the Philippines, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Philippines, Inc. (JCCPI), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the Cavite Economic Zone Investors Association (CEZIA)," he added.

Mr. Panga said Japanese small and medium enterprises are also considering global expansion and upgrading production via JICA's official development assistance program, and the stimulus program to support the transfer of Japanese manufacturers in China to ASEAN.

He also noted positive developments like the A-level credit rating with stable outlook recently given to the Philippines by the Japan Credit Rating Agency, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation 2021 survey in which the Philippines received the most votes for "good performance of sales in the ASEAN region," and Japan's support for infrastructure projects such as roads, aviation, and railways.

"To date, PEZA has registered 903 locator companies with Japanese equity generating total investment of P735.9 billion and providing employment to 350,486 Filipinos," it said. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

MATHILDE LANGEVIN-UNSPLASH

Sugar industry says yields increasing, mill downtime reduced

THE Philippine Sugar Millers Association (PSMA) said the modernization of milling operations is currently ongoing, adding that the sugar recovery rate has risen to more than 81% in the last three years, from 78% in the 1990s, while fewer mills are reporting unscheduled breakdowns.

"Industry reports published by the Sugar Regulatory Administration show that sugar recovery has increased to more than 81% in the last three years from 78% in the 1990s. Downtimes due to mechanical problems have gone down significantly with the introduction of new equipment," the PSMA said in a statement.

"Unknown to many, sugar factories have been undergoing rehabilitation and modernization to cope with the changing market environment," it added.

PSMA Deputy Director for Programs Oscar L. Cortes said that the modernization of mills started when government-owned factories were being privatized and the sugar industry was included in the Investment Priorities Plan (IPP) in the 1990s.

"During this period, mills have invested P20 billion on new production systems and operations. The SRA keeps track of all new equipment installed by the mills. These are all properly documented," Mr. Cortes said.

"When the modernization program started in the '90s, there were 41 sugar mills. Most of those that did not implement upgrades have stopped operating," he said.

Mr. Cortes added that the year a mill is established is "not indicative of the condition of the installed equipment and technical performance."

There are currently 28 operational mills, according to the PSMA.

"Many sugar mills have also moved beyond sugar production by installing ethanol production and cogeneration facilities that amount to P61.36 billion. Most of these projects have been registered under the IPP," it added. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

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Budget monitor urges Congress to ensure GAA aligned with recovery, climate change goals

A NON-GOVERNMENT organization that monitors budget spending said Congress needs to review the government's spending plans thoroughly to ensure they aid the economic recovery and help mitigate climate change, adding that legislators must not be rushed by the Palace's certification of the 2023 budget bill as urgent.

The proposed P5.268-trillion budget for next year must, first and foremost, be up to the task of helping the Philippines whether the foreseeable economic challenges and worsening effects of climate change, it said.

"Certifying it as urgent shouldn't mean preventing scrutiny of controversial budget items," I-Lead Executive Director Zyza Nadine M. Suzara said in a Messenger chat. "The 19th Congress should ensure that the national budget is responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens."

Citing the upcoming Congressional recess, Ms. Suzara acknowledged that "there is reason" to certify the 2023 General Appropriations Act (GAA) as urgent.

"A delayed budget legislation process would be a worse scenario," she said. "It could mean having a reenacted budget which could negatively affect the achievement of the Development Budget Coordination Committee's (DBCC) macroeconomic targets."

An urgent certification allows bills to skip some steps in the legislative process. The urgent certification is designed to keep the budget timetable on track and avoid the months-long delays that accompanied the 2019 budget.

Budgets are re-enacted when the spending plan for the new year is not passed in time, forcing the government to operate on the basis of the previous year's spending plan.

Re-enacted budgets mean delays in the delivery of public services, according to Representative Stella Luz A. Quimbo, House appropriations committee vice-chair, said in a statement.

Citing the government's economic planning agency, she said the re-enacted budget in 2019 cost the country 1-1.2 percentage points of growth that year.

The 2019 budget was passed in April of that year, meaning that the public works spending that the previous government depended on for growth missed a large portion of the dry-season window deemed ideal for construction before the rainy season set in.

Ms. Quimbo said legislators are expected to wrap up plenary debate for the budget bill on Wednesday, Sept. 27.

"It is the second stage of the budget process where Congress members dedicate another pair of eyes to review the proposed budget," she said. "So far, we have terminated debates for (the budgets of) 61 agencies and constitutional bodies, leaving us with 14 more to deliberate."

Ms. Quimbo said the budget is expected to be passed in the House before Oct. 1 and be approved by both chambers of Congress by the end of the year.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and credit company S&P Global Ratings recently lowered their growth forecasts for the Philippines, citing tightening monetary policy aimed at tempering inflation and the economic slowdown in major economies such as China and the US.

The IMF lowered its Philippine growth forecast for this year to 6.5% from the 6.7% estimate issued in July. Economic managers expect growth of 6.5-7.5% this year.

S&P, which lowered its own growth forecast to 6.3% from 6.5% previously, said it expects elevated core inflation to "drive up policy rates materially further" in the Philippines, Australia, India, New Zealand, and South Korea.

Press Secretary Trixie Cruz-Angeles, in a briefing, said Philippine fundamentals remain "strong" and that the economy is experiencing "a resurgence."

"Our economic managers forecast higher growth. They are in a much better position to make that determination," she said when asked to comment on the IMF growth downgrade. "We will have to see in the end whether that forecast is going to be more accurate than the local forecast."

Ms. Suzara said the 2023 proposed budget is not sufficient to generate new jobs.

"There is also no allocation for COVID-related expenditures like booster shots and the compensation and benefits of COVID-19 healthcare frontliners," she added.

The Philippines has relaxed mobility restrictions and outdoor face mask rules in a bid to reopen the economy further, including to foreign travelers. On Monday, the Department of Health (DoH) reported more than 17,000 infections in the Sept. 19-23 period.

Ms. Suzara said Congress also needs to provide for the activities prescribed by the Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation and Disaster Risk Reduction Roadmap.

According to the Budget department, the climate change adaptation (CCA) budget increased to P453.1 billion in the proposed 2023 budget from P289.7 billion in the 2022 General Appropriations Act.

"These aggregate figures are meaningless if they do not talk about them vis-à-vis timebound plans and investment requirements for CCA," Ms. Suzara said.

"The lack of significant growth in the agriculture budget outside of rice and corn is also troubling given that we have issues related to food security and sustainability," said Philip Arnold P. Tuaño, dean of the Ateneo School of Government, in a Viber message.

"The decreases in the budget for the Departments of Health and Social Welfare and Development, given the ongoing pandemic, are worrisome," he added.

Mr. Tuaño hopes the government expands its engagement with civil society and the academic community in preparing the budget. — **Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza**

Two-thirds of DMW budget devoted to worker repatriation

SOME 66% of the P15.21-billion 2023 budget for the newly established Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) has been allocated to the Emergency Repatriation Program run by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said in a statement on Tuesday.

Under the 2023 National Expenditure Program, P10.039 billion is earmarked for the program, which provides "assistance in bringing back distressed OFWs and human remains back to the country."

Related OWWA services include "providing temporary shelter at the OWWA Halfway Home, psycho-social counseling, stress debriefing, and transport services to their respective localities," the DBM said.

The OWWA, which will receive P11.67 billion, is an arm of the DMW.

Other budget items include P3.5 billion for the Office of the Secretary, of which P2.7 billion or 77% goes to the Overseas Employment and Welfare Program, inclusive of a P1.2 billion allocation for the AKSYON Fund pursuant to Republic Act No. 11641.

"Other programs included in the DMW budget allocation for 2023 are the Overseas Employment Regulatory Program, Labor Migration Policy and International Cooperation Program, Maritime Research and Skills Competency Program, and Provision for OFW Hospital and Diagnostic Center under Overseas Employment and Welfare Program among others," the DBM said.

Former President Rodrigo R. Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11641 on Dec. 30 creating the DMW.

In his first State of the Nation Address last July, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. outlined the first steps to be taken when the DMW is up and running, including "automat(ing) the verification of contracts and issue (of) secure Overseas Employment Certifications (OEC) that you can keep on your smartphone. I call on the (DMW and the DICT (Department of Information and Communications Technology) to make this a top priority."

"*Tinatawagan ko rin ang* Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) *na makipagtulungan sa* (DMW) *na tiyakin ang lahat ng mga* diplomatic post *ay tutulong na agarang maibalik sa trabaho ang ating mga* [OFW's] *na nawalan ng hanapbuhay nitong nakalipas na ilang taon* (I also ask the DFA to work with the DMW to ensure that all diplomatic posts help in restoring OFWs that lost their jobs in the last few years to working status.)"

Mr. Marcos also proposed a social media platform and a hotline, to be called One Repatriation Command Center, as well as education opportunities for the children left behind by OFWs. — **Diego Gabriel C. Robles**

Legislator seeks removal of Wi-Fi spectrum user fees to improve service in remote areas

A LEGISLATOR has asked the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) to recall two circulars, one of which outlines the spectrum user fees (SUF) charged for using the Wi-Fi spectrum, in order to encourage the growth of smaller telecommunications companies where telco services are irregular.

Samar Rep. Paul R. Daza said in a statement that memorandum circular (MC) 10-10-1997 needs to be withdrawn "to allow small players to operate in underserved areas."

He also described as outdated MC 02-05-2008, which defines the fee structure for Value-Added Services such as text and e-mail.

"The frequencies used by Globe, Smart, and the big players are licensed; these should really be charged," he said. "Meanwhile, the Wi-Fi frequencies, which are 'open,' must be freed from SUF as this will allow small players to operate in underserved areas."

The NTC has said that the minimally-used Wi-Fi frequencies generate negligible revenue — about P250,000 a year — for the agency.

The fees deter potential investors seeking to provide Wi-Fi internet in underserved areas, Mr. Daza said.

"These meager earnings from frequencies would better empower more entrepreneurs and tech startups to provide cheaper internet services," he said.

"The US, Australia, Singapore, South Korea and Indonesia have also implemented zero SUF on Wi-Fi," he added.

Mr. Daza said withdrawal of such fees will bring down the cost of online access.

The NTC and the DICT told legislators on Monday that they will review the circulars as requested.

Mr. Daza is the author of House Bill 43 or the proposed Sana All May Internet Act which seeks to do away with SUF for the Wi-Fi spectrum. — **Kyanna Angela Bulan**