

SSS put on notice to boost returns, invited to finance infrastructure

FINANCE Secretary Benjamin E. Diokno said the Social Security System (SSS) needs to improve returns from its investment portfolio to better reflect the strength of the domestic economy, and urged the pension fund to put its money in infrastructure.

"There is still much work to be done. With the rapid expansion of our domestic economy and improved business outlook, the SSS should be able to improve its earnings from investments," Mr. Diokno said during the pension fund's 65th anniversary celebration on Friday.

"We must continuously strive to improve the quality and performance of our investments through better financial management and market engagement," he added. "This would reassure our members that their contributions are indeed investments in the future."

Mr. Diokno said the pension fund has managed to serve 40 million members and 2.9 million

pensioners despite the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

"In the last six years, the SSS hit the P1-trillion mark in benefit payments. And despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our economy, the SSS fund remains robust, secure, and well-managed," he said.

Mr. Diokno has said that the Marcos administration is seeking investment from public and private insurance companies, including the SSS, to help fund its infrastructure program in an environment of tight budgets.

"We will maximize the use of long-term money for quality infrastructure," he told reporters early last month.

"We will not mandate. But we will give them the option. It's up to the individual boards to make a decision," he said at the time.

Later last month, the SSS said it will invest some of its resources to the Build, Better, More infrastructure program.

SSS President and Chief Executive Officer Michael G. Regino said that the pension fund, which covers private-sector workers, is currently in talks with the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), its counterpart pension fund for government employees. He said the GSIS has an infrastructure investment portfolio, unlike the SSS.

The government hopes to bring the infrastructure spending-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio to 5-6% each year between 2023 and 2028, even with high levels of government debt. The debt-to-GDP ratio in the second quarter was 62.1%, above the 60% threshold considered sustainable for developing economies.

The government is projecting economic growth of 6.5% to 7.5% this year and 6.5% to 8% next year until 2028. In the first half of 2022, growth has averaged 7.8%.

Mr. Diokno also commended the digitalization efforts of the

SSS, particularly in its core business processes and frontline transactions.

"These improvements have enabled the government to accurately target beneficiaries and quickly distribute aid for the Small Business Wage Subsidy Program as part of the government's COVID-19 response efforts to uplift our people and businesses," he said, adding how these efforts were also recognized by international social security organizations.

In a statement on Tuesday, the Department of Finance said that the SSS digitized the filing of claims, with payouts disbursed through electronic wallets, cash payment outlets, PESONet, or the Union Bank of the Philippines QuickCard.

SSS salary and calamity loan applications, as well as the renewal of pension loans, have also moved online and processed in real time via the SSS mobile application. — **Diego Gabriel C. Robles**

DBM releases PIB for risk allowance of healthcare frontliners

THE Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said it released P1.04 billion to the Department of Health (DoH) to cover allowances for government and private-sector health workers who worked during the pandemic.

The Special Allotment Release Order (SARO) was approved on Monday for the special risk allowance (SRA) of eligible frontliners who were involved in the pandemic containment effort between Sept. 15, 2020 and June 30, 2021, according to the DBM.

The amount covers unpaid SRA claims of 55,211 qualified health workers, who are eligible for P5,000 for each month they were on duty during the period.

"Qualified health workers refer to medical, allied medical, and other personnel assigned in hospitals and healthcare facilities, and who are directly catering to or in contact with COVID-19 patients, persons under investigation (PUIs) or persons under monitoring (PUMs)," the DBM said.

The DoH submitted the documentation for the SRA early last month. The allowances are authorized by the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act, an economic stimulus measure passed during the public health emergency.

The allowances are also authorized by the Duterte government's Administrative Order (AO) No. 36. The AO, issued in November, carries the title "Authorizing the grant of COVID-19 SRA to Health Workers directly catering to or in contact with COVID-19 patients during the State of National Emergency."

AO No. 42 later extended the SRA validity period to June 30, 2021.

Since the issuance of AO 36, SRA disbursements have totaled P11.857 billion.

"We understand and recognize the selflessness and immense sacrifice that our health workers continue to pour out throughout these turbulent times. *Isa po itong paraan sa pagkilala sa kanilang sakripisyo* (This is one way of recognizing their sacrifices)," Budget Secretary Ameh F. Panganda-

man was quoted as saying in a statement.

"Rest assured that we will continue to closely coordinate with the DoH so that our healthcare workers get the allowances and benefits they deserve," she added.

The DBM said that it has only received one other funding request from the DoH, which does not include the One COVID Allowance (OCA) that remains unpaid from before 2022.

"We only received two requests from DoH: one is for the P1.04 billion SRA, which we released yesterday, and the other is for the P11.5 billion for OCA (covering January to June 2022), which is already being processed," DBM Undersecretary Goddes Hope O. Libiran said in a Viber message.

"We have not received a request for the P64-billion OCA covering the retroactive effect of the law," she added.

At an online forum on Tuesday, DoH Officer-in-Charge Maria Rosario S. Vergeire said that the P11.5 billion is intended for about 1.6 million healthcare workers.

"I hope by next week we can start disbursing this money to communities for our healthcare workers," she said.

Separately, Republic Act No. 11712, or the Public Health Emergency Benefits and Allowances for Health Care Workers Act, became law on April 27 covering "the period of the Public Health Emergency commencing from July 1, 2021."

The law replaced the SRA with a Health Emergency Allowance (HEA), with the latter now determined by risk exposure.

"Risk exposure categorization as defined in the law, and their corresponding levels of allowances, are as follows: 1.) those deployed in 'low risk areas' shall be given at least P3,000; 2.) those deployed in 'medium risk areas' shall be given at least P6,000; and 3.) those deployed in 'high risk areas' shall be given at least P9,000," the DBM said. — **Diego Gabriel C. Robles**

NGCP urged to raise level of power available via standby contracts

THE National Grid Corp. of the Philippines (NGCP) has been urged to raise the level of standby power available to it in order to ensure continuous power should any of the generating plants supplying the grid experience outages.

The standby power is known as ancillary services, which the NGCP must enter into contracts for so they can be tapped when needed.

"The flow of energy should be stable and dependable to ensure operational reliability and prevent power outages that adversely impact the lives of our people and the economy in general," Senator Sherwin T. Gatchalian said in a statement. "NGCP must do its job and contract ancillary services."

The Luzon grid was placed on red alert last month, signifying a deterioration in the supply-demand balance that requires power rationing, which is carried out via rotating brownouts.

Mr. Gatchalian said ancillary services contracts for 899 megawatts (MW) are due to expire next year, while another 568 MW will expire in 2024.

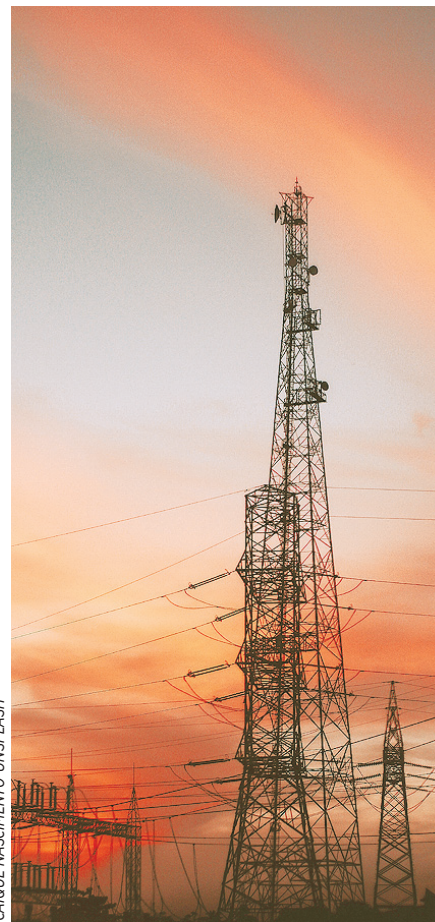
Given the Philippines' vulnerability to natural calamities, Mr. Gatchalian said an uninterrupted power supply is critical to support infrastructure and services used in the recovery and rehabilitation effort.

"The NGCP should not neglect its duty of contracting ancillary services so that we can ensure continuous energy supply and avoid the harm caused by constant brownouts to our citizens," he said.

The NGCP and its regulator have been in dispute about the appropriate level of ancillary service contracts to enter into. The grid operator incurs costs for the right to have ancillary power on standby.

Mr. Gatchalian backed the Energy Regulatory Commission's issuance of a show cause order to the NGCP over its failure to comply with its obligation to contract adequate ancillary services.

"I encourage the ERC to continue to watch over those who are responsible to fulfill their duty to ensure that the entire country has an adequate supply of electricity," he said. — **Alyssa Nicole O. Tan**



Bills establishing tech-voc special schools approved by House panel

A JOINED House committee approved on Tuesday bills seeking to create so-called "Meister" schools, which are geared towards training graduates for the needs of industry with a heavy concentration of specialized technical-vocational (tech-voc) courses.

House Bill (HB) 652 or the proposed Meister Schools Act, authored by Albay Rep. Jose Ma. Clemente S. Salceda, hopes to establish one such senior high school in every region.

The measure is modeled on tech-voc schools in South Korea, which in turn were inspired by the German system of apprenticeship until students reach "meister" status in their particular craft.

"The Department of Education maintains support for the fulfillment of this bill," Education department assistant secretary Alma Ruby C. Torio said at the hearing.

On the other hand, HB 996 or the proposed National Academy for Technical and Vocational Skills Systems Act, seeks to establish at least one specialized tech-voc high school in every highly urbanized city as well as in every region.

"We want students to be given an option to be able to work as a skilled craftsmen or go to college," Pasig Rep. Roman T. Romulo, the author of HB 996, said at the hearing.

The objective, he said, is to make students fit to work immediately after Senior High School, he added.

"We would like to commend these bills, particularly on giving depth on the concept of theoretical application of learning tech-voc in classrooms," Technical Education and Skills Development Authority Deputy Director General Tonisito M.C. Umali said at the hearing. — **Kyanna Angela Bulan**



DTI estimates e-commerce sellers at 2 million, exceeding forecasts

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said that the number of entities doing business as online sellers has risen to 2 million, far larger than the department's projections.

"As of our estimate for 2022, we are at 2 million e-commerce participants. We had a roadmap in 2021 with an estimate of 750,000 by 2022 but we now see based on our data that we reached 2 million," DTI Assistant Secretary Ann Claire C. Cabochan told PTV on Tuesday.

"We continue to monitor that these online sellers comply with existing laws. If you recall, the Consumer Act doesn't make a distinction between online sellers and those that sell in physical stores. They all have to adhere to the same rules; it's the same treatment. We emphasize what their responsibilities are and we are monitoring them very closely at this time," she added.

She cited the national standard guidelines for e-commerce operators.

In March, the DTI, along with the Intellectual Property Office, the National Privacy Commission and other agencies, issued a joint order on the laws and regulations governing online businesses.

The order regulates business-to-consumer and business-to-business e-commerce transactions to increase confidence in e-commerce overall.



Ms. Cabochan said the DTI is also concerned about practices like unfair pricing.

"The products, even if imported... must (fairly reflect) the purchase price," she said, even adjusting for the exchange rate. "We remind sellers (to refrain) from unfair trade practices. We have the law that will allow us to run after those that take advantage of the situation," she said.

"We used to have problems (obtaining the details of) a seller on an online platform. Now, with the help of the (National Privacy Commission), we can get the details of a seller and the platform

has to release them to the DTI if there's a complaint," she added.

In the nine months to September, complaints arising from online transactions totaled about 8,000 out of the 21,406 complaints about transactions in all selling formats.

"Those matters within the purview of DTI are mostly about liabilities and service imperfections for defective products, warranties, and the like," Ms. Cabochan said.

"If you feel you are being short changed or scammed, you can file a complaint with the DTI," she added. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**

Fuel subsidy distributed to 10,000 farmers, fisherfolk in Soccsksargen

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) is currently distributing a tranche of the fuel subsidy to nearly 10,000 registered farmers and fisherfolk in Soccsksargen.

"One of the most substantial operational expenses in farming and fishing is fuel," the DA said in a statement.

As of Sept. 27, oil companies have raised the price of fuel by a net P14.85 per liter for gasoline in the year to date. The corresponding increases in other types of fuel are P29.40 per liter for diesel, and P24.10 per liter for kerosene.

The most recent price action late last month was a decrease in the gasoline price by P1.65-P1.75, in the diesel price by P1.25, and in the kerosene price by P1.35.

Corn farmers and fisherfolk are eligible for fuel discounts of 30%, with discounts capped at P3,000, via Universal Storefront Services Corp., a local partner of the DA.

The DA said it is also actively encouraging farmers and fisherfolk in the region to modernize and boost productivity.

"To assist them, more than P49 million is set aside for corn farmers and fishermen in Soccsksargen through the fuel discount program which aims to extend assistance to farmers and fishermen who own agricultural or fishing machinery, either individually or through organizations," it added.

A corn farmer must be registered under the Farmers and Fisherfolk Registry System to be eligible for the fuel subsidy.

Eligible fisherfolk must also be registered, with the upper limit of boat size set at 3 gross tons. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**