Marcos vetoes budget items for tourism campaign, 2 others

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has vetoed three items in the 2023 national budget over issues concerning the use of funds, including a proposal to alter the Philippines' tourism promotion campaign.

In a statement on Wednesday, the Office of the Press Secretary said Mr. Marcos vetoed provisions on the use of the National Labor Relations Commission's (NLRC) income, the establishment of a revolving fund for the Department of Education (DepEd) TV, as well as the proposed change to the tourism campaign slogan.

Citing Presidential Decree 1445, or Government Auditing Code of the Philippines, Mr. Marcos said the NLRC is limited in the use of its income to depositing the funds with the National Treasury.

"Further, the funding requirements for the operations of the NLRC are already fully provided under its budget under this Act," he was quoted saying in his veto message addressed to the House of Representatives.

Mr. Marcos said no law authorizes the DepEd TV revolving fund. DepEd TV is the agency's platform for multimedia classes and serves as an information source for students on the coronavirus.

Under the 2023 General Appropriations Act, revolving funds may only be established for "business-type-activities," rendering the DepEd's fund plan for the platform ineligible.

The President also ruled out the change of tourism slogan, saying in his veto message, "in no case shall the appropriations be utilized to change the tourism campaign slogan."

The veto on the use of appropriations covers the Department of Tourism's Branding Campaign Program.

In his veto message, Mr. Marcos said the budget provision limits the exercise of the Executive branch's functions in implementing the Tourism Act of 2009, or Republic Act No. 9593.

Mr. Marcos on Dec. 16 signed the P5.268-trillion national budget for next year, the biggest budget to date.

Terry L. Ridon, a public investment analyst, said the vetoes showed the government's intention to streamline spending due to limited fiscal space.

"However, while it has done so in these areas, the expansion of confidential and intelligence funds in other agencies remains as this budget's original sin," he said via chat.

"Government cannot streamline budgetary appropriations while maintaining other line items which may be unnecessary at this time."

In the final version of the 2023 national budget, legislators restored the confidential and intelligence funds of DepEd which were earlier reduced to P30 million from P150 million.

Zyza Nadine M. Suzara, executive director of policy think tank the Institute for Leadership Education and Development, said the vetoes were reasonable.

The Department of Budget and Management normally reviews provisions of the budget bill against what is authorized by law to avoid unnecessary spending, she said in a Viber message.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Martin D. Pimentel III said via Viber: "I hope that the prioritization of the education sector as mandated by the constitution is really reflected in the budget law after the veto... Also, we still have to monitor how the budget is actually implemented." — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

FABRIKASIMF-FREEPIK

Refined sugar imports of 64,050 MT planned

THE Department of Agriculture said on Wednesday that it is expediting the import of 64,050 metric tons (MT) of refined sugar to stabilize prices.

In a memorandum order dated Dec. 20 and signed by Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo F. Panganiban, the department will convene the minimum access volume (MAV) advisory council to expedite imports via the MAV mechanism.

"In this regard you are hereby directed to immediately convene the minimum access volume advisory council and expedite the importation of 64,050 metric tons of refined sugar," according to the order addressed to Jocelyn A. Salvador, officer-in-charge executive director of the MAV Secretariat.

Mr. Panganiban said that President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., who also serves as the Agriculture Secretary, authorized the imports, citing the high price of sugar, confectionery items, and desserts in November.

Last month, price growth in sugar, confectionery items, and desserts was 38%, accelerating from 34.4% in October, according to consumer price index data.

The Philippines Statistics Authority said rising food prices bought inflation to a 14-year high of 8% in November, against 7.7% in October and 3.7% in November 2021.

In September, the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said that the government does not plan to import any more sugar for the rest of the year as the government is expecting domestic sugar output to boost inventories towards the end of the year.

In a statement on Wednesday, the United Sugar Producers Federation of the Philippines (UNIFED) is appealing the import decision.

"The UNIFED is appealing to the President to stop the move to import sugar while sugar milling is at its peak," UNIFED President Manuel R. Lamata said in a statement.

Mr. Lamata said the sugar harvest is at its peak, with raw and refined sugar stocks abundant.

"We see no need to importing sugar at this time. We are appealing to the President to halt this... until after an assessment of sugar stocks following the end of the milling season," he said.

Mr. Lamata noted that in the past three weeks sugar prices have fallen.

According to the SRA, sugar prices in Metro Manila as of Dec. 2 were P84.29 per kilo for raw sugar; P87.57 for washed sugar; and P98.07 for refined sugar.

This is slightly lower than the P90 to over P100 a kilo observed by the Department of Trade and Industry.

Danilo V. Fausto, president of the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. said in a statement that imports are necessary to help bring prices down.

"For as long as we only import what is needed. Hopefully it brings down the price. Price is a function of supply and demand," Mr. Fausto said. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Connectivity push targets 94 tourist destinations

A CAMPAIGN to upgrade connectivity is targeting 94 tourist destinations, the Department of Tourism (DoT) said on Wednesday, following the signing of an agreement with the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT).

The initiative will involve connecting destinations to fiber optic networks or satellites, the DoT said.

The 94 destinations include Boracay, Palawan, Cebu, Bohol, Siargao, and some "lesser-known destinations."

Tourism Secretary Christina G. Frasco said the department's push for digitalization and connectivity will allow the tourism industry to play a greater role in the economy.

"This will propel us to even greater numbers than we have already achieved thus far," she said.

International tourist arrivals, initially estimated at 1.7 million for 2022, have hit 2.4 million before year's end, counting from the reopening of borders with reduced entry requirements starting in February.

"This itself fulfills another objective under the Marcos administration for tourism and that is to equalize tourism promotion and development because not only will it give opportunities for key destinations to continue to open for development, but also allow even the most far-flung tourist destinations and local government units opportunities to be heralded to the world as a viable tourism destinations," Ms. Frasco said.

Information and Communications Technology Secretary Ivan John E. Uy said: "From the DICT perspective, we want to help all of the departments... get their services out in a more effective, more efficient, less redundant manner." — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

Findings of Rice Tariffication Law review expected by Q1

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said the results of the ongoing review of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) will be released by the first quarter.

"Hopefully we will be coming out with the results of the review by the first quarter of next year," Agriculture Undersecretary Mercidita A. Sombilla said in a briefing on Monday.

According to Ms. Sombilla, the law provides for a "mid-term assessment" of how the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) was used.

RCEF is a component of the law and is provided P10 billion a year for six years from rice import tariffs.

Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law of 2019 deregulated rice imports. It allows private parties to import with a tariff of 35% on grain brought in from Southeast Asia.

Ms. Sombilla said that for the full review of the RTL, this will be conducted in 2024.

"Right now, we don't see any amendments to the provisions because from what we are seeing, in terms of the impact of the law, it has been really positive," Ms. Sombilla said.

She said the law has led to yield increases and higher farmer incomes.

"What we are really trying to right now is really more on the expansive study on the cost of production of rice," as it was affected by the law, Ms. Sombilla said. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

GSIS housing program offered to members next year

TIERRA MALLORCA-UNSPLASH

THE Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) said it has signed an agreement that will allow it to offer its members a housing program next year by participating in a broader government program that aims to provide 6 million homes.

GSIS President and General Manager Jose Arnulfo A. Veloso said the pension fund for public servants signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development on Dec. 21.

The GSIS effectively joins the Pambansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino Program, the government initiative with the 6 million-home target.

"GSIS will adopt the same for government employees the allocation for which will be based on the breakdown of our sectoral membership," Mr. Veloso said.

"We are firming up the structure and will have it approved by the Board in January," Mr. Veloso said.

Under the Pambansang Pabahay program, awards will take the form of lease rights for about 100 years, with residents charged monthly rent.

Eligible for lease rights are first-time homebuyers, Pag-IBIG Fund members, and minimum wage earners.

Other signatories to the MoU involved the Home Development Mutual Fund (Pag-IBIG Fund), the Social Security System, the Land Bank of the Philippines, and the Development Bank of the Philippines. — **Keisha B. Ta-asan**

OPINION

Wishing for a merrier Christmas for our public health workers

TAXWISE OR OTHERWISE

PAOLO JOHN DANTES

It is yet again the season of giving and cheer with the holidays just around the corner. This is also the time of year when public and private offices slow down to recuperate before taking on next year's challenges. Even the Congress has gone on holiday break beginning Dec. 17 after passing the budget bill of P5.268 trillion for 2023, which was signed into law on Dec. 16 as the 2023 General Appropriations Act (GAA).

In the 2023 budget, the Department of Health (DoH) may be allocated anything between the House-approved P296.3 billion and the Senate-approved P323 billion. In 2022, the DoH was granted a budget of P268.4 billion. Although these figures may look sufficient to those who prepared and approved the budgets, we cannot ascertain whether these amounts are really adequate to cover the needs of our health workers.

With the Philippines still facing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on top of other health emergencies, our health workers are constantly being overworked. However, the compensation provided still has not reached the point where we may confidently say that their salary and benefits are commensurate to the risk they are facing every day, as evidenced by the protest held by a health workers group at the DoH in Manila in November.

According to a DoH presentation from September 2021, out of the 526,727 healthcare workers in the Philippines, 462,955 or approximately 87.9% are in public health. It is no secret that one reason behind the Philippines' dwindling supply of health workers is the abundance of opportunities for higher pay overseas. There is, therefore, a question of how we can properly compensate our health workers in order to keep them in the country, especially as part of the public sector, to attend to our health-related needs and concerns.

In response to the needs of public health workers, Republic Act (RA) No. 7305 or the Magna Carta of Public Health Workers, was signed (a) to promote and improve the social and economic well-being of health workers, their living and working conditions and terms of employment; (b) to develop their skills and capabilities to make them more responsive and better equipped to execute health projects and programs; and (c) to encourage those with proper qualifications and excellent abilities to join and remain in government service. Under this law, the list of allowances to which our public health workers are entitled to include Hazard Allowance, Subsistence Allowance, Longevity Pay, Laundry Allowance, and Remote Assignment Allowance.

For context, RA No. 7305 defines "health workers" as all persons who are engaged in health and health-related work, and all persons employed in hospitals, sanitaria, infirmaries, health centers, rural health units, barangay health stations, clinics and other health-related establishments owned and operated by the government or its political subdivisions with original charters, and includes the medical, allied health professional, administrative and support personnel employed regardless of employment status.

Currently, several bills have been filed in the 19th Congress aimed at amending RA No. 7305 to provide expanded benefits to public health workers in the form of increases in salaries and allowances, income tax exemptions for hazard allowance, and additional allowances such as Special Risk Allowance, Rice Subsidy Allowance, and Clothing Allowance. However, all these bills are still pending with the respective committees of both houses since the focus of the Senate and the House of Representatives was the 2023 budget.

Since the bills are still pending, our legislators may also consider providing additional support to our public health workers in the form of a 20% discount on certain purchases (e.g., for transportation services, for accommodation in hotels, resorts, and other similar establishments, in restaurants, in recreation centers, for medicine and drug purchases, for admission fees) as an alternative or an addition to the above-mentioned additional allowances. The 20% discount privilege will be similar to what is currently available to national athletes, coaches, and trainers since our public health workers may also be considered extraordinary individuals who bring honor and recognition to the Philippines.

Unlike the additional allowances currently being proposed in the bills, the government neither has to allocate a separate budget nor divert the current funds in order to grant the 20% discount privilege to public health workers. Public health workers would definitely feel the direct impact of this privilege since the additional cash saved from the 20% discount can go towards purchasing other needs and wants.

I believe such a benefit would spark greater interest to work in the public health sector, which would also be in line with RA No. 7305's objective of enticing individuals with excellent credentials and skills to join and remain in government service.

Given that there are bills pending in both houses of Congress, the intention of our legislators to promote the welfare of public health workers is clear. The next step is to follow through on those intentions with appropriate action, which may be through the passage of laws that would support public health workers' needs.

Perhaps this time, we can show our gratitude to public health workers by giving them a lasting gift that will help sustain them in their calling to public service. This benefit would surely show our appreciation for their efforts, especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the same time, highlight their value as precious stars on the Christmas tree that is the Philippines.

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