Marcos certifies as urgent Senate measure creating Maharlika fund

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has certified as urgent a Senate bill on the establishment of the Maharlika Investment Fund.

In a letter addressed to Senate President Juan Miguel F. Zubiri, Mr. Marcos certified Senate Bill No. 2020 as urgent, citing "the downgrade of global growth projections this year on the account of debilitating inflation."

Mr. Marcos also cited the continued conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has resulted in "fluctuating and unstable prices of crude oil and other fuels."

He also said that "continuing interest rate hikes in the international financial sector" justify the creation of the sovereign wealth fund.

"There is a compelling need for a sustainable national investment fund as a new growth catalyst to accelerate the implementation of strategic and high-impact large infrastructure projects that will stimulate economic activity and development," Mr. Marcos said.

The Senate is currently deliberating on the measure. Once interpellation wrap up, the period of amendments will start.

An urgent certification expedites a bill's passage by allowing its approval on second and third reading without any intervening three-day delay.

The counterpart House of Representatives measure creating Maharlika — House Bill (HB) No. 6608 — was also certified as urgent in December and was duly passed by that chamber.

The Supreme Court recently rejected a petition filed by House opposition legislators seeking to void the HB 6608 certification.

The Maharlika legislation calls for initial capital for the wealth fund to be provided by dividends from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, contributions from the Philippine Amusement Gaming Corp., Land Bank of the Philippines, and the Development Bank of the Philippines, as well as proceeds from the privatization and transfer of government assets.

Other sources such as royalties and special assessments may also be tapped. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

Farm equipment maker bats for RCEF extension, says goals unmet

THE Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PHilMech) said it is hoping for an extension of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF)-Mechanization Program ahead of the final P10 billion annual funding tranche next year.

In a news conference, PHilMech Executive Director Dionisio G. Alvindia said the estimated P30 billion worth of machinery for distribution between 2019 and 2024 will be adequate to service only 14% of the 2.7 million hectares planted to rice.

"*Kung ako ang tatanungin, 'yung* 14% *na* intervention, *hindi pa iyan halos magkakaroon ng* impact," (If you were to ask me, the 14% worth of interventions will have little impact) Mr. Alvindia said.

"So, in my honest opinion, the RCEF-Mechanization Program should be extended so more farmers can get their own farm machinery," he added.

Republic Act No. 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law authorizes RCEF funding of P10 billion for six years. The appropriations are funded by rice import tariffs.

PHilMech gets a P5-billion annual allocation and is tasked with distributing machinery to qualified rice farmers.

Mr. Alvindia said PhilMech has distributed 25,000 units of farm machinery to at least 8,000 farmer cooperatives and associations.

"The next step is to provide qualified farm cooperatives and associations and local government units (LGUs) with rice processing systems so they can directly market their milled rice to farmers," he added.

Mr. Alvindia said PhilMech has started building an Agricultural Mechanization Design and Prototyping Center in Nueva Ecija.

The center is the result of collaboration with the Korea International Cooperation Agency, Korea Institute for Development Strategy, and the Korea Agricultural Machinery Industry Cooperative.

The center fabricates farm machinery parts in partnership with Philippine manufacturers trained by South Korean engineers.

It is expected to start operations by late 2023.

The center's design and prototyping equipment and tooling cost an estimated $3.6 million. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Onion SRP plan on hold pending validation of farmers' growing costs

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said its plan to impose a suggested retail price (SRP) on domestically-grown red and white onions is currently on hold pending validation of the costs incurred by farmers in growing the commodity.

"It was announced that we will be adopting an SRP but has not yet been signed by Senior Undersecretary (Domingo F. Panganiban). According to him... the cost structure (should) be studied further," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Rex C. Estoperez said in a briefing on Wednesday.

The department announced last week that it estimated the SRP for red onions at P150 per kilo and white onions at P140 per kilo following industry consultations.

For now, he said the DA will continue to monitor onion inventories held in cold storage.

Mr. Estoperez said the DA is cautious in setting SRPs. Earlier this year the price cap was set at P250 per kilo, which many vendors did not honor.

The cost of red onion peaked at P720 per kilo in December.

Jayson H. Cainglet, executive director of Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura, said the organization does not understand why the DA has delayed the announcement.

"We do not know what's keeping the DA from issuing the SRP. What they need once it has issued is to be aggressive," he said.

"Everyone already agreed (on an appropriate price) — producers, cold storage operators, wholesalers, retailers. It's a question for us what's keeping them from issuing an agreement that everyone has reached a consensus on," he added.

Mr. Cainglet said cold storage operators he consulted, particularly in the onion-growing center of Bongabon, Nueva Ecija, are selling onions at P90-P100 based on guidance given at the consultation.

"In the cost structure that we discussed for onions, we have already established (what prices constitute profiteering)," he said.

Mr. Cainglet said price monitoring councils of local government units have been mobilized and are awaiting the SRP announcement.

"*Ngayon, hindi sila pwedeng manghuli* or at least *pagsabihan 'yung* retailers *hanggang hindi nilalabas 'yung* SRP (They cannot apprehend any retailers until the SRP is released)," he said.

Mr. Estoperez said the DA is coordinating with the Department of Trade and Industry and wants to tap the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group of the Philippine National Police.

As of Tuesday, the prevailing price of domestic red onion in Metro Manila was between P100 and P200 while white onion was selling for between P150 and P200. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Palace orders DICT to oversee LGUs' e-Governance programs

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has ordered the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) to lead the effort to bring e-Governance to the local government level, the Palace said.

"Let's capacitate our LGUs (local government units) so they can adapt to the (e-Gov) system," the President told Information and Communications Technology Secretary Ivan John E. Uy at a meeting on Tuesday, according to a statement from the Palace released on Wednesday.

The President also directed Mr. Uy to regularly update LGU e-Governance programs.

"That's really the essence of digitalization. Let's be sure that we are able to upgrade this system. Set it up to get them (LGUs) ready, so they know how to operate it," he said.

In December, the DICT announced the e-Gov system, which is based on a mobile application integrating all government services into one platform.

The e-Gov system also seeks to centralize government cloud services and digitalize citizen feedback, the Presidential Communications Office (PCO) said.

The PCO said that aside from the e-Gov system, DICT's priority projects include the National Broadband Plan, Free Public Internet Access Program, National Government Data Center, and a program to enhance ICT capacity through upskilling and reskilling. — **Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza**

UK expects continued growth in record trade with PHL

THE UK expects record levels of trade with the Philippines to grow further with the rollout of the Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) and British Investment Partnerships (BIP), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said in a statement.

British Ambassador to the Philippines Laure Beaufils said bilateral trade is "the highest it has ever been — and it continues to grow alongside British investment and economic cooperation. This year we will launch the DCTS to further boost bilateral trade between our two countries," Ms. Beaufils was quoted as saying.

"We are excited about the next chapter of our economic cooperation, including our support to the promotion of the ease of doing business and digitalization, and through our BIPs, which will boost investments into green infrastructure development," she added.

The DTI said the two countries signed a partnership statement on trade, investment and economic cooperation during the fourth round of bilateral economic dialogue in Makati City on May 19.

"The DCTS and BIP are solid frameworks that will ensure our economic relations will remain still strong as ever," Trade Undersecretary Ceferino S. Rodolfo said.

"The Philippines will continue to work with the UK government to realize concrete opportunities and foster more synergies in areas of mutual interest — in trade, investment, renewable energy, to name a few," he added.

In March, the UK government unveiled the BIP scheme, which would mobilize up to 8 billion pounds of funding for green infrastructure, clean technology, and climate finance.

The DCTS, announced in August, will replace the UK's Generalized System of Preferences trading scheme. The new trading scheme is set to benefit 65 developing countries.

Aside from the tariff benefits, the DCTS will simplify seasonal tariffs that will allow the entry of more Philippine exports into the UK.

The partnership signed by the Philippines and the UK committed to grow bilateral trade, jointly promote the DCTS, push investment via BIPs, and encourage an "enabling business environment."

The statement also called for the Philippines and UK to create a joint action plan on trade, investment, and economic cooperation for 2023 and 2024.

"This will provide specific details of the strategic partnership and associated actions to deliver on the above ambitions. We will review the delivery plan on an ongoing basis to ensure continued coherence and relevance to our joint work," according to the partnership statement.

The UK estimates that bilateral trade in goods and services was 2.4 billion pounds in 2022, up 26%.

The Philippines was the UK's 64th largest trading partner in 2022, accounting for 0.1% of UK trade. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

PAGCOR cancels service provider license

THE Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp. (PAGCOR) has canceled the accreditation of offshore gaming customer relations service provider CGC Technologies, Inc. (CGC), alleging its involvement in criminal activity.

"The cancellation of CGC's accreditation came barely a week after PAGCOR issued a stern warning to its offshore gaming licensees and its accredited service providers who are involved in illegal activities," PAGCOR said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Investigations confirm that CGC, an accredited service provider operating under offshore gaming licensee Oriental Game Ltd., was involved in criminal activities thus warranting the cancellation of its accreditation. It was also found that CGC violated some of the conditions attached to its accreditation," it added.

The regulator also forfeited CGC's performance bond and imposed a $350,000 fine "for its failure to ensure the legitimate conduct of its business."

PAGCOR said it issued a suspension order on GCG earlier this month.

"The company was embroiled in various allegations including credit card fraud, serious illegal detention, and human trafficking activities," it said.

PAGCOR Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Alejandro H. Tengco said operators with cancelled accreditations and licenses must "immediately cease their operations."

"Continued operation despite the cancellation of their accreditation or licenses shall be considered illegal. Immediate action will be taken against those who are engaging in such," he added.

CGC was contacted for comment but had not replied at the deadline. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**