Senate MUP pension reform measure approved by four committees

A SENATE bill seeking to overhaul retirement benefits for military and uniformed personnel (MUP) has been approved by four of the chamber's committees.

On Thursday, the Senate Committees on National Defense and Security, Unification and Reconciliation; Government Corporations and Public Enterprises; Ways and Means; and Finance released their committee report on Senate Bill No. 2501, which seeks to set monthly retirement pay at 50% of the base pay for the last position held by retired MUPs.

Under the bill, retirees may choose to receive benefits in lump sum or directly through an accrual method.

New MUPs will be required to contribute to the new pension fund system.

Members of the military will be required to contribute 7% of their base monthly salary, with the National Government contributing 14%, according to a copy of the measure dated as filed on Nov. 29.

The contribution scheme for other uniformed personnel is 9% of salary and a government top-up of 12%.

The current system does not require MUPs to contribute to their pension fund, which are funded entirely by the National Government.

The measure, if passed, would permit a guaranteed 3% annual increase in the base pay of active personnel and in the pension benefits of retirees for the next 10 years.

In September, the House of Representatives approved its version of the bill on third and final reading. House Bill No. 8969 or the proposed Military Uniformed Personnel Pension System Act, also requires new entrants to contribute to their pension fund, at a rate of 9% of monthly salary with a 12% government top-up.

The measure is on the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council's list of priority bills.

The measure authorizes the President to adjust the pension and survivorship benefits "due to adverse fiscal or economic conditions," as determined by the Development Budget Coordination Committee. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

BW FILE PHOTO

NGCP seeks resolution of TRO on Panay-Guimaras tower sites

THE National Grid Corp. of the Philippines (NGCP) said it is seeking an "urgent resolution" from the Supreme Court (SC) of a temporary restraining order (TRO) that blocked it from working on a site needed for its Panay-Guimaras 138-kilovolt interconnection project.

"We are hopeful for the urgent resolution of the issue so as not to hamper the interconnection which will improve the region's power transmission line projects," the NGCP said in a statement on Thursday.

The SC had granted the petition of the Iloilo Grain Complex Corp. (IGCC) for Certiorari and Prohibition with Very Urgent Application for Temporary Restraining Order and/or Writ of Preliminary Injunction.

IGCC owns the property where two towers are set to be erected. The NGCP said the site is "crucial as this 1.7-kilometer transmission line will connect the proposed Iloilo Substation to the Ingore Cable Terminal Station."

The cable terminal station will serve as the connection point of the submarine cable to Guimaras Island.

The NGCP filed an expropriation case on Sept. 30, 2022 to acquire the property, which was approved by Iloilo Regional Trial Court (RTC) Branch 33 on Nov. 3, 2022.

A writ of possession was then issued on Dec. 12, 2022, but the IGCC submitted a motion for reconsideration on Jan. 18, which was denied by the RTC.

The dispute was then elevated to the SC, which granted the TRO.

The NGCP said that the TRO prevents it from carrying out a component of the project crucial to linking the two islands.

"The Supreme Court's decision is disheartening as it hinders us from fulfilling our commitment to the residents of the islands of Panay and Guimaras, including fast-developing Iloilo City," the NGCP said.

"Nevertheless, we steadfastly maintain our dedication to enhancing power transmission within the area despite this setback," it added.

The interconnection project is an upgrade of the existing submarine cable connecting Panay and Guimaras. It is targeted to be completed in December next year.

The NGCP said it continues to seek "an expeditious and amicable settlement" with the landowner. However, the grid operator said that it is reluctant to move forward with IGCC's proposal, which involves a reroute through a residential area affecting five households.

"When we plot the route of our transmission line projects, a major consideration is the existence of structures and residents. We aim to traverse areas that will cause least destruction to property, and result in the least number of persons displaced," it added.

According to the grid operator, "any deviation in the established route may also affect adjacent towers and cause further delay to the completion of the project." — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

SRA calls for sugar SRP to be set at P85 per kilo

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said on Thursday that it is pushing for a suggested retail price (SRP) for refined sugar at P85 per kilogram.

Administrator Pablo Luis S. Azcona told reporters that the SRA and the Department of Agriculture (DA) are currently studying an SRP scheme following the failure of prices to drop despite increased supply.

"We have been pushing for an P85 SRP. The only (snag) there is how it will be enforced," Mr. Azcona added.

He said government agencies need to be able to enforce the SRP for refined sugar at retail.

The SRA has said that retail prices for refined sugar have remained stable since February last year at P80 per kilo to P110 per kilo in supermarkets.

"They said before that price (of sugar) went up because the supply was not enough; the supply is here, and we are also milling. But the retail price has not yet decreased," he added.

According to the regulator's Sugar Order No. 1, raw sugar production was estimated at 1.85 million metric tons during the 2023 to 2024 crop year.

Mr. Azcona said that the farmgate price of raw sugar had declined by about P10 per kilo to an average of P2,620 per 50-kilo bag.

"One thing that is being talked about is getting the other agencies involved; they are the ones who have control on the retail side. The DA and SRA charter say that we cannot participate in the market price of sugar," he added.

He said that sugar prices are not reflecting the decline in the farmgate price of the commodity.

The SRA had projected earlier that the farmgate price of raw sugar will hit P3,000 per 50-kilo bag.

"We will see how we can fix it, but that's an immediate concern because prices are sliding and farmers are being affected," Mr. Azcona added. — **Adrian H. Halili**

PHILIPPINE STAR/EDD GUMBAN

BIR says digital TIN cards now available

THE Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) said digital Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) cards are now available for use by the public.

"With this new system, we can eliminate the practice of fixers and scammers selling TIN online while giving taxpayers a convenient alternative in getting a TIN, instead of lining up at our Revenue District Offices," BIR Commissioner Romeo D. Lumagui, Jr. said in a statement on Thursday.

The BIR noted that the digital TIN is free.

"Taxpayers availing of the services of online sellers of TIN ID assistance risk the possibility of getting invalid or fake TIN and wrong taxpayer type classification, which may impact their future transactions with the BIR," it added.

"The Digital TIN ID serves as a reference for the Taxpayer Identification Number of the taxpayer and as a valid government-issued identification document accepted in various government agencies, local government units, banks, employers, and other institutions," the BIR said.

The BIR noted that the digital TIN does not require a signature and may be verified online through the agency's Online Registration and Update System (ORUS).

Taxpayers with physical TIN cards may also avail of the digital TIN by enrolling their accounts on the ORUS. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

PHILIPPINE STAR/RUSSELL PALMA

UK eyeing gov't-to-gov't setup for major PHL procurement deals

By Justine Irish D. Tabile
Reporter

THE United Kingdom (UK) said it is working to develop a government-to-government scheme that will simplify major procurement exercises with the Philippines.

"We are in the process of working with the government to develop a memorandum of understanding to facilitate government-to-government agreements on trade. That is a conversation that's happening right now," Ambassador to the Philippines Laure Beaufils said on Thursday.

The ambassador said the talks are in their early stages, with no specific timetable set.

She added that such a scheme will "simplify government-to-government trade and simplify government-to-government arrangements for big procurements."

Government-to-government procurement deals will function in parallel with the UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme, which allows the tariff-free entry of 99% of Philippine exports to the UK.

She also said that a Joint Economic and Trade Committee with the Philippines is also under discussion.

According to Ms. Beaufils, UK-Philippine trade rose 32% in the year to March to 2.9 billion pounds.

The Philippines is the 59th largest trading partner of the UK.

Chris Nelson, executive director of the British Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines, added that British meat exports to the Philippines could recover next year.

"I think this year will be lower than last year, but I think what we're looking for is to continue the relationships which we've established here with the key meat importers. Therefore, I think it's more important that we will likely see a recovery," Mr. Nelson said.

However, he said that the extension of lowered tariffs for meat and the passage of the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act will be key to an export rebound next year.

"We should be realistic. It will not happen probably in the initial part of the year but probably more towards the further on," he said.

"I'm optimistic that in 2024 we will see a strong rebound, latter half of the year because obviously they've got to gear up for that," he added.

The UK Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board estimates that UK pork exports to the Philippines declined 67.5% as of Nov. 11, while beef exports declined 57.1%.

Disaster spending fell 52.4% in 2022 — PSA

DISASTER RISK reduction expenditure declined by 52.4% in 2022, to P315.89 billion, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said.

The PSA defines disaster risk reduction expenditure as "activities undertaken to preserve and protect society, the economy, and the environment from disasters."

"Disaster risk reduction expenditure accounts allow us to monitor the resources allocated and demonstrate how investing in (it) saves lives and resources from a cost-benefit economic point of view," it added.

Disaster mitigation accounted for a little over a third of total expenditures, equivalent to P107.97 billion, 64.5% higher compared to a year earlier.

"Disaster mitigation includes activities and measures to reduce existing disaster risk or to limit the adverse impacts of a hazardous event. Activities and measures (include) structural measures and construction, non-structural measures, land-use planning, and early warning systems management," the PSA said.

Expenditure on disaster prevention dropped 50.4% to P77.98 billion. This includes "activities and measures to avoid existing and new disaster risks," as well as the "risk prevention in advance of hazardous events and risk prevention in or after a hazardous event."

Disaster management expenditure — items related to preparedness and emergency management — fell 57.4% to P75.65 billion in 2022.

PHILIPPINE STAR/MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

"Disaster management is the organization and management of resources and responsibilities for creating and implementing preparedness and addressing all aspects of emergencies and other plans to respond to, and to decrease the impacts of disasters," the PSA added.

Meanwhile, disaster recovery spending fell 79% to P54.29 billion.

"Disaster recovery involves the restoration and improvement of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural, and environmental assets, systems, and activities of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and "build back better," to avoid or reduce future disaster risk. This includes relocation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction," it said. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**