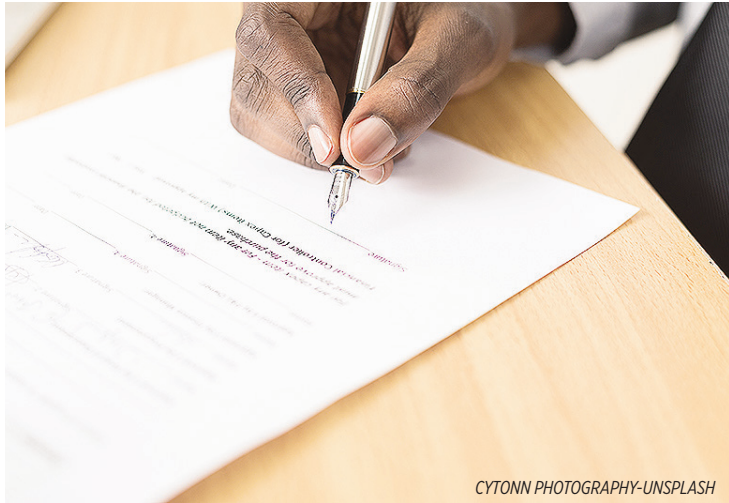


S. Korea welcomes ease of doing business improvements ahead of FTA ratification



CYTONN PHOTOGRAPHY-UNSPASH

PHILIPPINE EFFORTS to improve ease of doing business are welcome and will ease the flow of trade once a free trade agreement (FTA) with South Korea comes into force, the Korean ambassador said.

"Korea will ratify the agreement soon, and I have been assured that the Philippine Senate will (ratify) soon. With this win-win agreement, our two countries' trade and investment are set to increase in the coming years," Ambassador to the Philippines Lee Sang-hwa said.

"In this context, Korea strongly supports the Philippine gov-

ernment's efforts to improve its ease of doing business environment," he added.

In September, the Philippines and South Korea signed an FTA, which is designed to open up both economies to each other's goods and help mitigate supply chain disruptions.

Mr. Lee said the potential areas of cooperation between the Philippines and South Korea include renewable energy and critical minerals.

"We hope that there will be more progress in the two countries' collaboration in high-effi-

ciency clean energy sources such as nuclear power and hydrogen technology. And we also look to intensify cooperation in critical minerals," he added.

South Korea is one of the Philippines' top trade and investment partners. Last year, it ranked 4th in bilateral trade, which was valued at \$15.45 billion. South Korea was also sixth in total approved investments at \$90.62 million.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lee said that people-to-people exchanges are also expected to grow along with trade.

"The Korean Visa Application Center, which opened in September, receives 800-1,000 visa applicants every day from Filipinos who want to visit Korea," he said.

"And the number of Korean visitors to the Philippines is expected to reach the pre-pandemic level of 2 million people," he added.

The Department of Tourism has reported that visitors from South Korea in the year to date ending Nov. 27 numbered 1.27 million or 26.37% of the total, making it Philippines' top source market for foreign arrivals. —

Justine Irish D. Tabile

Process restructuring must come before automation, ARTA says

THE GOVERNMENT must transform business processes before automating services, the Anti-Red Tape Authority (ARTA) said.

"Business process transformation first before automation, because the moment you automate efficient processes, you can maximize the benefits, as opposed to automating an inefficient process," ARTA Deputy Director General for Operations Gerald G. Divinagracia said at a Stratbase ADR briefing on Thursday.

"There was a need for government agencies to transform their services, to deliver excellent services. We see government services online, however, (which are) not yet connected end-to-end. Services are not fully automated... That's why we embarked on transparency and connectivity in terms of end-to-end processes," he added.



MINI THIAN-UNSPASH

Mr. Divinagracia cited challenges to doing business such as poor turnaround time, government fees and requirements and lack of predictability.

"The way for us to solve this is through two major (approaches): a conducive regulatory framework and delivery of government support and services. Streamlining and enabling agencies in streamlining their processes," he said.

officials and businesses who corrupt the system. This will level the playing field and attract businesses that play by the rules," Mr. Alcuaz said.

"Businesses want to be playing in the Philippines. Rather than corruption, the money will be flowing to more infrastructure that lasts longer. Not infra where they cut corners or scrimp on the materials that deteriorate in a few years," he added.

Mr. Alcuaz said transparent government will help attract investors.

"If you have a transparent government rather than corruption, the money that the businessmen will be spending will be going to developing the best products and services for Filipinos and/or foreign buyers and for the world, and into investments and expansions that create more jobs," he added. —

Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsion

NIA agrees to host RE projects at irrigation sites

THE Department of Energy (DoE) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) said on Thursday that they signed an agreement to use irrigation sites for renewable energy (RE) projects.

Under the agreement, the DoE will use NIA sites, including areas identified for future irrigation projects, in a manner that does not hinder the facilities' irrigation functions.

"The agreement between DoE and NIA signifies a crucial step forward in the pursuit of water security and sustainable resource management, which is aligned with the goals outlined in Executive Order No. 22, series of 2023," according to a statement issued by the Presidential Communications Office.

Energy Undersecretary Sharon S. Garin said the agreement is in line with the government's goal of generating 35% of power from renewable energy sources by 2030 and 50% by 2040.

NIA administrator Eduardo G. Guillen said the project converts water rights for multi-purpose use, adding that the NIA is now looking at floating solar power generating plants.

"As part of the strategic initiative, NIA's irrigation water will not only help the agency to expand economically and generate additional funds for the operation and maintenance of its irrigation facilities, while allowing the DoE to provide the public with better access to clean, reasonably priced energy sources," the Palace said. —

Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza

Agricultural goods trade deficit widens in Q3

THE trade in agricultural goods posted a deficit of \$2.97 billion in the third quarter, with the decline in exports outweighing weaker imports, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

In a report, the PSA said agricultural trade — the sum of exports and imports — fell 12% to \$6.2 billion, reversing the 17.5% increase a year earlier.

Agricultural exports declined 13.3% to \$1.61 billion for the period, accounting for 8.2% of total exports.

Leading exports were edible fruit and nuts as well as peel of citrus fruit melons, valued at \$492.09 million or 30.5% of the total.

Agricultural products shipped to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ac-

counted for \$182.98 million, with tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes the top items.

Malaysia was the Philippines' top agricultural export market in the region, accounting for \$53.88 million.

"Exports of agricultural goods to (the European Union) in the third quarter of 2023 reached \$285.19 million, which contributed 12.5% to the country's total value of exports to EU member countries," the PSA said.

The Netherlands remained the top buyer of agricultural goods within the EU. It purchased \$285.19 million or 52.8% of Philippine farm exports to the region.

Animal or vegetable fats and oils and their cleavage products, prepared edible fats

and animal or vegetable waxes remained the top agricultural exports to the EU.

Imports of agricultural goods fell 11.5% to \$4.59 billion, representing 14.6% of total imports.

Cereals remained the top agricultural imports for the period at 21.1% of the total, or \$969.89 million.

"The (Philippine) agricultural imports from EU member countries amounted to \$382.34 million or 20.5% of the total value of imports in the third quarter," it said.

Among EU members, Spain was the top supplier of goods, accounting for \$91.69 million or 24% of overall farm imports.

Meat and edible meat offal were the top imports from the EU. — **Adrian H. Halili**

Customs goods seizures hit P42.5 billion

THE Bureau of Customs (BoC) said it seized P42.5 billion worth of illicit goods in the year to date ending Dec. 1.

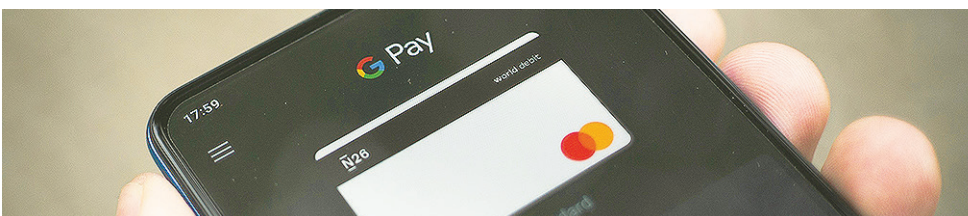
According to preliminary data, the BoC showed that counterfeit goods made up the bulk of seizures at P24.36 billion, followed by illegal drugs (P7.58 billion), smuggled agricultural products (P3.78 billion), and cigarettes and tobacco (P3.77 billion).

The seized items also include general merchandise (P964.1 million), fuel and oil (P716.4 million), steel products (P585.2 million), used clothing (P351 million), and vehicles and accessories (P264.1 million).

Customs Commissioner Bienvenido Y. Rubio said the smuggled goods seized during the period doubled from a year earlier.

Seized items are typically disposed of through auction, condemnation, or donation.

In the 11 months to November, the BoC collected P813.651 billion, or about 93% of its full-year target. Collections were 2.2% higher than the P795.966-billion target for the period and up 3.09% from a year earlier. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsion**



MIKA BAUMEISTER-UNSPASH

Internet Transactions Act seen enabling effective consumer protection measures

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said the Internet Transactions Act (ITA) will allow it to effectively protect consumers against unfair online business practices.

"The ITA is a landmark measure as it comes at a time when online selling and online buying are now part of our way of life," Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said in a statement on Thursday.

The measure, signed this week, provides for more extensive monitoring of electronic commerce (e-commerce) companies with the creation of an online business registry and an e-commerce bureau.

"We are particularly looking forward to the creation of an e-commerce bureau that will also provide the DTI much needed resources, both human, and financial, in implementing our mandate to develop and promote e-commerce in the country," Mr. Pascual said.

The e-commerce bureau will be an arm of the DTI, and will implement the law, as well as the Electronic Commerce Act of 2000 and the Philippine E-Commerce Roadmap.

"The e-commerce bureau shall also encourage the establishment of an e-commerce trust mark in close collaboration with the private sector and maintain a government-wide online consumer complaint tracking system that will be actively monitored by the DTI," it said.

In a separate statement, the DTI said business groups and private companies have expressed their support on the signing of the ITA.

Philippine Retailers Association President Roberto S. Claudio said the law "will ensure a level playing field between traditional and online retailing to benefit Filipino consumers and merchants in the changing omnichannel environment."

Fintech Alliance Philippines Founding Chairman Lito Villanueva said that the law will also set standards and institutionalize a code of conduct within the e-commerce ecosystem.

"This is a critical component toward a sustainable and inclusive digital economy. We look forward to working with the DTI and Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas particularly on incentivizing digital payments to increase adoption by businesses and consumers," he said.

PLDT Inc. President and Chief Executive Officer Alfredo S. Panlilio said that the legislation will further strengthen the digital economy by enhancing relationships between online merchants and online consumers.

"This will help ensure the safety and security of internet transactions, which are the building blocks of a dynamic e-commerce ecosystem," Mr. Panlilio said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Lifting of ban on new NCR ecozones expected to benefit IT-BPM industry

THE lifting of the moratorium on developing new economic zones and information technology (IT) parks in Metro Manila will benefit the IT and business process management (IT-BPM) industry, property consultancy Colliers said.

In a statement, Colliers said Metro Manila remains the preferred "starting point" for investors setting up shop in the country given its infrastructure, large talent pool, vibrant business centers, and ease of doing business.

"This is also evident in the office real estate market given the current Metro Manila to countryside office demand split of 80:20," it said.

On Nov. 24, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. signed Administrative Order (AO) No. 11, which amended AO No. 18 (2019). The earlier AO had imposed a freeze on the processing of ecozone applications in Metro Manila.

"Colliers believes that the IT-BPM sector will greatly benefit from this amendment as this will allow Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA)-registered

entities or even prospective locators considering PEZA to move forward with their projects and consider more locations within Metro Manila," the firm said.

"Allowing more accredited IT parks in (the region) also provides an opportunity for local government units outside the major business districts to host new IT-BPM locators that will help facilitate job generation," it added.

Under AO No. 11, applicants granted pre-qualification clearances from PEZA before the moratorium's effectivity will be allowed to resubmit their applications.

According to Colliers, the available PEZA-accredited office stock in Metro Manila is currently at 1.5 million square meters, or 57% of the 2.6 million square meters of total available space in the region as of September.

"With the recent amendment to AO 18, enterprises registered with an investment promotion agency will have more options to explore for their future real estate plans — may it be a new setup, expansion, or relocation," Colliers said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

PhilMech completes farm equipment design facility in Nueva Ecija

THE Philippine Center for Post-harvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) said it has completed an agricultural machinery design center in Nueva Ecija which it expects to start operating soon.

In a statement, PhilMech said construction of the Agricultural Machinery Design and Prototyping Center has wrapped up.

The facility will focus on developing and adapting equipment suitable for the Philippine agricultural environment.

PhilMech Director Dionisio G. Alvindia said the facility will also

help come up with post-harvest solutions.

"The farm equipment manufacturing industry in the Philippines also stands to gain from the AMPDC as the center will take the lead in modernizing the industry by helping improve their manufacturing systems and design of their products," Mr. Alvindia added.

The facility is partly funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).

The facility's construction cost was P370.55 million. About P289 million was provided by the South Korea through KOICA. — **Adrian H. Halili**

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