

Converge targets free public internet at more airports after NAIA

INTERNET service provider Converge ICT Solutions, Inc. announced on Thursday that it has finished setting up free public WiFi in the terminals of Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA).

"There will be several more in the offing for our free public WiFi program for the rest of the year," Converge Chief Executive Officer Dennis Anthony H. Uy said in a statement.

The company said that registered users accessing the free public WiFi in NAIA Terminals 1 and 2 would have access to "fiber-fast internet" for two hours upon logging onto the Converge network.

Converge subscribers with a GoFiber account have an additional six hours of free internet access for up to five devices if they enter their Go-

Fiber account number on the login page.

The company said that it has activated approximately 105 access points throughout the two terminals.

Converge launched its free WiFi service in NAIA Terminals 3 and 4 last year.

In addition to NAIA, Converge announced that it will establish free public internet connectivity at other domestic and international gateways.

These include Francisco Bangoy International Airport, Mactan-Cebu International Airport, Bacolod-Silay Airport, Iloilo International Airport, Laoag International Airport, Pagadian Airport, Tacloban Airport, and Zamboanga International Airport. — **Sheldeem Joy Talavera**

Megaworld says P500 million raised through MREIT block sale

TAN-led property developer Megaworld Corp. said it has finalized a P500-million transaction involving the sale of common shares in its real estate investment trust (REIT).

Megaworld sold 40.65 million common shares of MREIT, Inc. at a price of P12.30 each under a block sale arrangement, as disclosed in a regulatory filing on Thursday.

BDO Securities Corp. was tapped as the broker for the transaction.

"The proceeds from the block sale will be settled on April 22. The company will submit the required reinvestment plan detailing the use of proceeds from the block sale transaction," Megaworld said.

MREIT's portfolio consists of 18 office and commercial assets with an aggregate gross leasable area of 325,424 square meters.



MEGAWORLDCORP.COM

Its properties include 1800 Eastwood Ave., 1880 Eastwood Ave., and E-Commerce Plaza in Eastwood City, One World Square,

Two World Square, Three World Square, 8/10 Upper McKinley, 18/20 Upper McKinley, and World Finance Plaza in McKinley Hill.

Also included in the company's portfolio are One Techno Place, Two Techno Place, Three Techno Place, One Global Center, Two Global Center, Festive Walk 1B, and Richmond Tower in Iloilo Business Park, and One West Campus and Five West Campus in McKinley West.

Megaworld recorded a 29% increase in its 2023 attributable net income to P17.3 billion as its consolidated revenue jumped by 17% to P69.7 billion.

MREIT saw a 13% improvement in its distributable net income to P2.8 billion last year from P2.5 billion in 2022 as revenue surged by 14% to P4.2 billion.

On Thursday, Megaworld stocks were unchanged at P1.74 apiece while MREIT shares climbed by 0.31% or four centavos to P12.84 per share. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

Rate cut, from SI/1

The central bank stood pat for a fourth straight meeting in April, keeping its benchmark rate at a near 17-year high of 6.5%.

From May 2022 to October 2023, the Monetary Board raised borrowing costs by 450 basis points (bps).

Mr. Remolona had said that the current rate is already tight and is "already doing its work."

"Comments from the governor reaffirm the fact that the current policy stance is restrictive and is in a position to slow economic activity in an attempt to fend off demand side pressures," ING Bank N.V. Manila Senior Economist Nicholas Antonio T. Mapa said in an e-mail.

"This goes against some assertions that the current monetary policy stance is normal. When policy rates are in restrictive territory, they go to work by slowing down the economy which in turn can lead to slower inflation as demand falls," he added.

The economy grew by a weaker-than-expected 5.5% in 2023,

falling short of the government's 6-7% target.

Economic managers recently lowered the gross domestic product (GDP) growth target to 6-7% this year from 6.5-7.5% previously, taking into consideration persistent inflation and a looming global slowdown.

First-quarter GDP data is set to be released on May 9.

"If the BSP believes the current rate is achieving its goals, any easing within the year might be minimal. The extent of easing would likely depend on a range of factors, including inflation trends, economic growth data, and external economic conditions," Mr. Roces said.

Inflation accelerated to 3.7% in March, the second straight month that it quickened on a monthly basis.

The BSP earlier said that inflation could temporarily accelerate to above the 2-4% target range over the next two quarters as upside risks remain.

The central bank sees inflation averaging 3.8% this year.

Mr. Roces said the BSP is also focused on maintaining price stability through the foreign exchange market which could "help anchor inflation expectations and prevent an inflationary spiral."

The peso earlier this week hit the P57-level for the first time in nearly 17 months.

The local unit continued to depreciate for a sixth straight day, closing at P57.19 against the dollar on Thursday. This was weaker by a centavo from its P57.18 finish on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Bank of the Philippine Islands Lead Economist Emilio S. Neri, Jr. said there is no "meaningful effect" on GDP growth if the BSP continues to keep its policy rate unchanged.

Election spending and slower inflation compared with the past two years would still support demand this year, he said.

"The risk of a growth impediment could come more from global headwinds that may compel BSP to hike some more. But that's still

a low probability event and not our central scenario," he added.

Mr. Remolona said that the Monetary Board will only consider raising rates if inflation expectations are de-anchored. "When we see that the markets and households begin to believe that inflation will surge, then we have to consider a rate hike," he said.

The BSP last adjusted rates in October when it delivered a 25-bp rate hike in an off-cycle move.

"The governor is correct to say that 6.5% (policy rate) is already doing its work and further tightening may only be necessary if headline inflation starts climbing towards the 6% level which is still highly unlikely at this point," Mr. Neri said.

"Furthermore, Mr. Remolona's indication that he is not in favor of hiking further simply indicates that rate hikes have a negative impact on growth and that further rate hikes would do even more damage to growth," Mr. Mapa added.



PHILIPPINE STAR/MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

THE MAIN ISLANDS of Luzon and the Visayas on Thursday experienced red and yellow alerts for a third day in a row as the country suffered extreme heat.

Outages, from SI/1

"The previous government did not acknowledge the need to build more capacities and accordingly we are suffering from these red and yellow alerts," Mr. Layug said in a Viber message.

He said these forced outages will reduce economic and business activity, which "will always negatively impact the economy."

"Right now, the current DoE (Department of Energy) is doing its best to encourage investors to build more capacities," he said.

Regulators, however, are still monitoring and collecting information to determine the cause of the power plant outages.

"The Department of Energy continues to closely monitor and coordinate with the National Grid Corp. of the Philippines (NGCP) and all generation companies during this period of extreme heat where electricity usage is at a record high," the DoE said in a statement on Thursday.

In an advisory as of Thursday morning, the NGCP said the Luzon grid was placed under red alert status from 3-4 p.m. and 8-10 p.m.

A yellow alert was also raised in the region from 1-3 p.m., 4-8 p.m., and 10-11 p.m.

Available capacity at the grid was 13,397 MW while the peak demand was 12,892 MW, according to the grid operator.

"Nineteen power plants are on forced outage, while one is running on derated capacity, for a total of 1,891.3 MW unavailable to the grid," the NGCP said.

A yellow alert was placed over the Visayas grid from 1-9 p.m. and was later put on red alert from 6-7 p.m. as of its 2:34 p.m. update.

During the period, available capacity was 2,410 MW while the peak demand was 2,354 MW.

"Thirteen power plants are on forced outage, while nine others are running on derated capacities, for a total of 696.7 MW unavailable to the grid," the grid operator said.

Manila Electric Co. (Meralco) said that as of 12 p.m., more than 400 MW were available de-loading capacity from its commercial and industrial customers.

Citing the data from the NGCP, the DoE said that both the Luzon and Visayas grids reached all-

time high peak demand for the year so far.

INVESTIGATION

Monalisa C. Dimalanta, chairman and chief executive officer of the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC), said that they are reviewing the reports from the affected stakeholders before coming up with a preliminary analysis of the incidents.

"Based on our findings, we will formalize the investigation to determine compliance or noncompliance by the relevant stakeholders and implement appropriate measures to impose penalties on any lapses and address issues that may have contributed to the adverse situation," Ms. Dimalanta said in a statement.

As of 10 a.m. of April 18, around 1,179.52 MW of capacity has been restored in Luzon while around 272.72 MW was restored in the Visayas, according to the ERC.

Overall, a total of 2,671.95 MW of capacity are still on outage.

"We have directed power plant operators to submit to the Commission their estimated timelines for the resumption of their operations, and we will continue to monitor their timely compliance," Ms. Dimalanta said.

"We are fully aware of the difficulties brought about by these power disruptions and affirm our commitment to a thorough investigation," she added.

Amid the continued red and yellow alerts, the DoE reiterated its call for the public's cooperation in "minimizing power consumption, specially at peak hours during the remainder of the hot season."

Alexander D. Ablaza, president of the Philippine Energy Efficiency Alliance, Inc., said that shifting to more energy efficiency technologies such as solar thermal cooling can be done instead of "depending routinely on energy conservation efforts."

"While energy conservation is the behavior that is most convenient to promote to mitigate the impacts of power supply deficits, it may not be the easiest for energy end-users to adopt because their quality of life and productivity are compromised," he said in a Viber message.

Education, from SI/1

to weather and climate disruptions, Mituse Uemura, education advisor of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, told *BusinessWorld* on the sidelines of the Asia Philanthropy Summit here on Tuesday.

"There are a couple of things that we learned during the pandemic, one of which is to consider context difference. Context varies from one place to another," she said.

"A localized approach is needed especially in the context of the Philippines because there's a huge diversity in terms of the geographical locations and also the climate."

The Philippines was among the last countries to reopen schools following the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. UNICEF said the lack of preparation in the face of changing climate conditions threatens the progress of the country's learning recovery efforts.

The National Economic and Development Authority in 2021 said that the lack of face-to-face schooling for one year during the pandemic may result in over P11 trillion in productivity losses over the next four decades.

The Philippines has recently seen class disruptions in many areas due to extreme heat, with official figures as of April 5 showing at least 3.6 million students have been affected by the suspension of classes in 5,000 schools.

The Education department has given school heads the power to decide when to switch to remote learning "in cases of extreme heat and other calamities." Philippine lawmakers, meanwhile, are discussing whether or not there is a need to return the country's old academic calendar.

Filipino students were still among the world's weakest in



PHILIPPINE STAR/EDD GUMBAN

ADDITIONAL electric fans are placed inside a classroom as students cope with the hot summer weather.

math, reading and science, according to the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), with the Philippines ranking 77th out of 81 countries and performing worse than the global average in all categories.

The Philippine government recently included in its list of priority legislation a bill seeking to establish a national learning intervention program to accelerate the recovery of learning losses incurred during the pandemic.

Myo-Zin Nyunt, deputy director of UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, said that over half of Grade 5 children in the Asia-Pacific region cannot read and write properly even years before the pandemic, a situation that's likely worsened due to the health crisis and persistent threats from climate change.

In the Philippines, the rate hit 90%, according to UNICEF data.

"Learning losses, they existed before COVID-19. Children go to schools but never learn as they are needed to learn," Mr. Nyunt told *BusinessWorld*.

"And the Philippines, for one, had the longest school closure. The Philippines closed schools for almost two years. So that has

really exacerbated the learning loss," he said, adding that climate change is exacerbating the learning poverty.

In the face of these risks, the Philippines should pursue a decentralized education system, in which schools and other sectors at the local levels assume key decision-making roles, Ms. Uemura said.

"They don't have to wait for something to come and then trickle down," she said. "However, the Department of Education is really advised to provide guidance in some areas."

But pursuing local education governance should be complemented with capacity-building efforts, Ms. Uemura said, adding that local government units should be given the necessary tools to come up with data-driven decisions in the face of climate and health disruptions.

"At least, it is some sort of a tool to determine the degree of risks to the children's health," she said. "It's something that the National Government can actually help."

While local governments may consider implementing blended learning in terms of calamities, it should never allow digital classes to replace face-to-face schooling, Ms. Uemura said, noting that the

rising number of students who lack soft skills does not bode well for the future of the country's labor force.

GREEN SKILLS

Meanwhile, Mr. Nyunt said the Philippines should — as early as now — adopt a long-term program that would enhance students' green skills.

Setting up solar power panels at schools would not only prevent class disruptions during electricity-disrupting weather events but would also promote climate awareness among students, who should be given green tasks from managing battery storage of solar panels to helping craft a climate-friendly environment in campuses.

"So, if green skills are in the curriculum, the children will be very conversant while they're still young," he said. "And when they go to secondary and university levels, they will become more active and aware."

"They will become more aware and more active, pushing for more climate-friendly policies for the government and looking for more green skills," he added.

The Philippines still fell short of the over \$16 billion in required capital investments needed for its green transition, according to a recent report on Southeast Asia's green economy.

It said the Philippines lacks sector-specific emission targets, and only four of 10 major emitting companies have set net-zero and emissions goals.

Mr. Nyunt said the Philippines has a very young demographic compared with its Southeast Asian peers, and the country needs to ensure its youngsters are taught green skills to help the Philippines in its renewable ambitions.