Trade department threatens P400,000 fine on uncertified vape products

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) warned importers and manufacturers of the certification requirements for vaporized nicotine and non-nicotine products covered by Department Orders 22-06 and 24-02.

In a statement, the DTI said that all businesses involved with vaporized nicotine and non-nicotine products are required to secure a valid Philippine Standard license.

"Non-compliance with these certification requirements will result in formal charges under Section 23(c) of Republic Act (RA) 11900 or the Vaporized Nicotine and Non-Nicotine Products Regulation Act," the DTI said.

According to the DTI, a manufacturer or importer's first offense will merit a fine of P100,000, while the second offense triggers a fine of P200,000.

For the third offense, the business will be fined P400,000 or be subject to imprisonment of up to three years, or both, at the court's discretion.

"Business permits and licenses may also be revoked or canceled," the DTI said, referring to third offenses.

On Jan. 2, the DTI issued a department order stating that it will no longer recognize import commodity clearances (ICCs) as a licensing scheme for vaporized nicotine and non-nicotine products.

The DTI, however, noted that products with valid ICCs will be allowed to still be distributed and sold until supplies are exhausted. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Reforestation program to invite foreign investors seeking offsets

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said it is preparing the terms for investing in reforestation programs taking place on 1.2 million hectares of land.

Environment Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga told reporters on the sidelines of the Japan-Philippines Environment Week ceremony that the reforestation pitch will be directed to potential foreign investors that need to offset their emissions.

"We expect that there will be interest on the part of foreign corporations that are willing or need to offset what they are emitting. The overall goal for us is to reforest," she said.

"What we want to do is within this administration build our way towards releasing up to 3 million hectares for investment in reforestation, for agroforestry, for other uses related to sustainable use of our forest land," she added.

With regard to environmental projects involving Japan, Ms. Yulo-Loyzaga said she is looking forward to a Japanese role in developing an electronic waste management system for the Philippines.

"We don't have a system really in place for e-waste," she said.

She added that there will be discussions on technology that would be available for the Philippines to address its broader solid waste problem, with waste-to-energy under consideration.

According to the World Bank, waste-to-energy solutions have been identified as a sustainable alternative to landfills.

Undersecretary Jonas R. Leones added that the DENR is currently finalizing a framework between the DENR and Japan's Ministry of Environment.

"We are just hammering out the details of collaboration," Mr. Leones said.

Ms. Yulo-Loyzaga added that the Japanese government is willing to provide technical assistance, scientific cooperation, financing, and official development assistance.

"We're looking at how all of these can actually deliver on our own goals in terms of decarbonization, sustainable communities, and ecological preservation, by way of different types of technology and interventions," she said. — **Adrian H. Halili**

AKAP rules expected next week, Budget dep't says

THE Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said guidelines for the Ayuda Para sa Kapos ang Kita Program (AKAP) are likely to be released by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) next week.

AKAP provides one-time cash assistance worth P3,000 to P5,000 to workers whose income falls below the poverty threshold.

"*Sinusulat nalang ng* DSWD. *Nagbigay na po ng komento ang dalawang ahensiya na tutulong sa pagbabalangkas, ang* DoLE (Department of Labor and Employment) and NEDA (National Economic and Development Authority) (The DSWD is drafting it with input from DoLE and NEDA)," Budget Secretary Amenah F. Pangandaman told a radio program on Tuesday.

"Expect that by next week, these new guidelines might be signed," she said.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. placed AKAP in conditional implementation status when he signed the P6.326-trillion budget for 2025.

It requires that the P26-billion AKAP to "only be disbursed after clear guidelines that are put in place to ensure proper use of the funds," the DBM said.

However, Ms. Pangandaman said the guidelines were just one of the documents that DSWD needs to pass before the Office of the President can approve the AKAP releases.

"*Kailangan makapag* provide *sila ng bagong* physical target, financial target, special budget request." (They need to submit physical and financial targets and a special budget request.)

The DBM said that the P757-billion budget adjustments, which include the funding for AKAP are subject to a process called For Issuance of SARO (Special Allotment Release Orders) or FISARO.

The SARO will only be released once agencies meet the requirements and secure approval from the President.

Ms. Pangandaman said the release of funds might take a while as the guidelines have yet to be finalized with comment from economic managers.

Among the AKAP's new provisions is the involvement of DoLE and NEDA.

NEDA will also conduct a Monitoring and Evaluation Study on AKAP with the Philippine Statistics Authority.

She also said that the beneficiaries have now been "defined" as those with incomes below the regional minimum wage. She added that there will be no "middle man" as DSWD social workers will be present.

The list of beneficiaries will be posted on the DSWD website monthly. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

Germany sees PHL potential niche in offshore wind jobs

THE PHILIPPINES can meet growing global demand for workers in the offshore wind industry, the German Embassy in Manila said.

David Klebs, economic counselor at the German Embassy, said more broadly that expertise possessed by Philippine workers will be in higher demand worldwide.

"As you know, the Philippines is a nation of seafarers. And if you think about offshore wind, many of the skills used in constructing or maintaining offshore wind turbines are (transferable from shipboard jobs)," Mr. Klebs said in a briefing late Monday.

"There's a bonus for the Philippines because it already has an advantage of being a seafaring nation. With some additional skills, workers here can do (offshore wind turbine) maintenance, which is in high demand worldwide," he added.

He said the Philippines can also employ such workers once it builds its own offshore wind farms.

"If you look at the Philippine Energy Plan that the Department of Energy released in 2023, they are on the road to doing this, and they have identified humongous potential offshore wind capacity that is more than any energy currently produced in the Philippines," he said.

"For offshore wind you do need the skills, the sets of tools and requirements, and by getting ready now you'll be ready later for the future," he added.

The German Embassy, in collaboration with the German-Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GPCCI), said that it will be hosting a sustainability forum on Jan. 31 that will focus on green infrastructure and green jobs.

"This forum represents an important step forward in addressing the most urgent challenges… The Philippines stands at a very critical juncture in its commitment to sustainability as reflected in its national development contribution under the Paris Agreement," Marie Antoniette E. Mariano, president and chairman of the GPCCI, said.

Previously, the GPCCI, citing its World Business Outlook Survey, said businesses in the Philippines see efforts to meet sustainability requirements as a competitive advantage.

Yves Aguilos, head of government affairs and data protection officer at GPCCI, said that to tap this potential, the Philippines will have to look at green jobs and new technology. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

House freezes work on bills seeking legislated wage hikes

BILLS seeking to impose a legislated national wage hike have been sidelined at the House of Representatives, with the House Labor committee focusing its efforts on exercising oversight over an aid for displaced workers program.

The House labor committee also faces limited time to discuss the bills with the approach of the 2025 midterm elections, Rizal Rep. Juan Fidel Felipe F. Nograles, the committee's chairman, said.

"We haven't had a vote yet because we're currently wrapping up. We'll adjourn by the end of February, so there's very limited time to hold another committee hearing for a vote," Mr. Nograles told *BusinessWorld* on the sidelines of a hearing.

When asked if the wage hike bills will not be revisited, he said: "Not really. It's just that time is limited because the 19th Congress is wrapping up. But if we find more time, we'll include it in the next agenda."

The 19th Congress is scheduled to end on July 27. Both the Senate and House will go on a four-month break between February and June for the midterms.

Separate House bills are seeking to increase wages of private-sector workers by between P150 and P750 have been filed. The Senate has approved a bill increasing the daily minimum wage in the private sector by P100.

"For now, we're giving the wage boards an opportunity to review their existing wage orders before we hold a (wage hike) hearing. The review by all the wage boards has not yet been completed," Mr. Nograles said.

The Philippines adjusts salaries through regional wage boards, though labor groups have called the hikes insufficient.

"I'm saddened that the salary or national wage increase for our workers cannot be discussed at the moment because it is one of the major concerns of our people today, second only to inflation," Deputy Minority Leader and Party-list Rep. France L. Castro, a member of the House labor committee, told *BusinessWorld*.

"We will still encourage and enjoin the labor committee to finalize the (wage hike) hearing and report on the salary increase bill," she added.

Mr. Nograles said his committee will focus on overseeing TUPAD (Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged or Displaced Workers) in the remaining days of the 19th Congress. TUPAD is an aid program providing emergency and temporary employment for laid off or underemployed workers.

"We will still push for the salary increase," Ms. Castro said. "If we need to mobilize our organizations and lobby, we will do it." — **Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio**

Empowering Senior Citizens

At a recently concluded forum organized by Capampangan in Media, Inc. (CAMI), Senior Citizens Partylist Representative Rodolfo "Ompong" Ordanes (right) reaffirmed his dedication to partnering with the government and civil society to promote the welfare of senior citizens. A staunch advocate for the rights and protection of the elderly, Rep. Ordanes has led various initiatives, including livelihood programs, medical services, and financial assistance, to uplift their lives.

CAMI member and staunch Kapampangan Joe del Rosario Zaldarriaga (left) moderated the forum as the initiatives of the Senior Citizens Partylist were explained as the elderly continue to be productive in contributing to society.

Disease dampens 2024 PHL banana exports

PHILIPPINE banana exports fell 2.97% in 2024, with the industry currently dealing with Fusarium wilt, also known as Panama disease, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said.

In its Banana Market Review, the FAO said that preliminary data indicate that exports of Philippine bananas dropped to 2.28 million metric tons (MMT) in 2024.

The Philippines has ceded its position as the third-leading banana exporter in 2023 and is now fourth.

Fusarium wilt is a soil-borne fungal disease that blocks the banana plant's vascular system and deprives it of minerals, nutrients, and moisture. Affected plants turn yellow and die.

The Tropical Race 4 (TR4) strain of fusarium wilt was first detected in Davao City in 2009 and continues to threaten the Cavendish banana, the main export variety.

"Supplies from the Philippines, the main exporter from the region, reportedly continue to be affected by the spread of TR4," the FAO added.

The United Nations agency said that the spread of the disease has continued to cause production losses, with disease containment efforts also adding to the industry's financial burdens.

"Producers faced added difficulty stemming from unfavorable exchange rates amid the depreciation of the dollar in the first half of (2024)," the FAO added.

Citing the Pilipino Banana Growers and Exporters Association, it added that about 51,000 hectares out of the 89,000 hectares of land available for banana cultivation continued to be operational amid the spread of TR4.

The group had also said that the rising geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea additionally affected some exports of Philippine bananas.

Manila and Beijing have repeatedly clashed in the disputed waterway, with both sides accusing each other of raising tensions. — **Adrian H. Halili**

DTI, DMW tie up to promote OFW investment, startups

THE departments of Trade and Industry (DTI) and Migrant Workers (DMW) have signed a memorandum of agreement (MoA) to encourage investments and businesses established by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and their families.

Under the agreement, the DTI will promote investment options to OFWs and help beneficiaries access financial support through government and private-sector financial institutions.

The DMW's role is to identify and evaluate OFW beneficiaries qualified to avail of the services.

It will also monitor and maintain a database of the beneficiaries to identify who has completed their business registration, received entrepreneurial training, or obtained financial assistance.

"This is a very important MoA signing because… we need to protect the income that OFWs bring to their families and the money they earn," Trade Secretary Ma. Cristina A. Roque said.

"We have to make sure that their money is put to good use so when they come home, they have something to support them and their families," she added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**