Agricultural output,
from S1/1

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said that yield reached a record high of 4.09 MT per hectare, offsetting the decline in rice-planted areas. It targets a record palay output of 20.46 MMT this year.

PSA data showed corn production declined by 5.1% in the first quarter, a reversal of the 0.5% growth last year.

Coconut output slipped by 0.3%, slower than the 3.3% decline in the same quarter in 2024.

Crops that saw a double-digit increase in the value of output include tobacco (80.4%), cacao (23.6%), sugarcane (19%), rubber (13.6%), coffee (10.7%) and mongo (10.1%).

On the other hand, the value of production contracted for abaca (15.4%), sweet potato (9.4%), mango (7.5%), cabbage (6.4%) and calamansi (0.8%).

PSA data showed the poultry sector grew by 9.4% to P75.22 billion, contributing 17.2% to total farm production.

The value of chicken egg production rose by 12.1%, while chicken output increased by 8.7% and duck by 1.5%.

On the other hand, duck egg production declined by 2.2% in the first quarter.

"We can see a little shift in the consumption pattern of consumers to the poultry sector as a source of food protein due to higher prices of meat, especially of hogs," Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. President Danilo V. Fausto said in a Viber message.

"This can be seen in the good performance of chicken and egg production and decrease in growth of the hog sector," he added.

However, Mr. Fausto warned the local poultry industry may face challenges if there are increased imports from the US.

"The poultry sector will experience headwinds, however, if the US will require the entry of more chicken to the country as a bargaining chip to reconsider the tariff imposed by Trump for Philippine exports to the US," he said.

SLUMP IN LIVESTOCK

Meanwhile, the value of livestock production continued to decline in the first quarter.

PSA data showed livestock output slipped by 2.8% to P57.82 billion in the period ending March, although the pace of decline was slower than 3.5% in the same quarter last year. This accounted for 13.2% of the total farm output.

Hog production slumped by 3.7% in the first quarter, while carabao output dipped by 0.2%.

However, an increase in production was seen in dairy (10.5%), cattle (1.3%), and goat (1.2%).

"Livestock contraction is expected as the much-vaunted ASF (African Swine Fever) vaccine of the DA is ineffective with little adoption by hog raisers," Mr. Adriano said.

The DA in March said it was expecting the approval of the Food and Drug Administration by April for the commercial rollout of ASF vaccines from Vietnam.

"Hopefully, we could also begin later this year the commercial roll out of the long-awaited vaccine for ASF, which will help kickstart the DA's a large-scale hog repopulation effort," Mr. Laurel said.

Bureau of Animal Industry data as of April 11 showed ASF had been detected in 54 villages, up from 39 as of March 14.

Meanwhile, fishery production rose by 1.5% to P55.1 billion in the first quarter, accounting for 12.6% of the total output. This was an improvement from the 0.2% drop in the same period in 2024.

Milkfish (*bangus*) production rose by 7.8%, while tilapia inched up by 2.2%.

Double-digit growth was seen for slipmouth or *sapsap* (21%), mudcrab or *alimango* (20%), Indian mackerel or *alumahan* (14.5%) and blue crab or *alimasag* (12.1%).

However, declines were seen for fimbriated sardines or *tunsoy* (34.5%), roundscad or *galunggong* (14.7%), cavalla or *talakitok* (12.7%) and bigeye tuna or *tambakol* (11.2%).

Raul Q. Montemayor of the Federation of Free Farmers said the agriculture sector still has a lot of catching up to do, especially since output declined last year.

In 2024, farm output shrank by 2.2%, due in large part to the El Niño weather pattern, which is estimated to have caused about P15-billion in damage to local agriculture. — **K.A.T.Atienza**

Unemployment,
from S1/1

However, the number of Filipinos with jobs dropped by over a million to 48.02 million in March, from 49.15 million a year ago, signaling concerns about labor participation and underemployment.

For the first quarter, the average employment rate was unchanged at 96%.

Mr. Mapa said that the decline in the employment rate in March can be traced to the drop in jobs in the agriculture sector.

He said the suspension of government hiring may have also affected the labor data in March.

"There was a ban on hiring in government positions, we think this had an impact on the reduction of employed persons," he said, referring to the election ban on hiring of new government employees that runs from March 28 to May 12.

By sector, services remained the top employer, accounting for 62% of total employed persons in March, followed by agriculture (20.1%) and the industry sector (17.9%).

The education sector saw the largest annual increase in jobs during the month, adding 210,000 jobs. This was followed by administrative and support service activities (+145,000), fishing and aquaculture (+138,000), arts, entertainment and recreation (+91,000), and human health and social work activities (+51,000).

On the other hand, agriculture and forestry saw the biggest annual decline in employment (-609,000). This was followed by public administration and defense and compulsory social security (-349,000), manufacturing (-281,000), wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (-175,000), and professional, scientific and technical activities (-100,000).

Wage and salary workers accounted for 63.4% of the workforce in March, followed by self-employed individuals without paid employees (27.9%), unpaid family workers (6.6%), and employers in family-operated farms or businesses at 2.1%.

Working hours averaged 41.2 hours per week in March, increasing from the average 40.7 hours reported last year and the 41.4 hours in February.

"The Philippines' unemployment rate remained low, signaling a robust labor market that should help support domestic demand and overall economic growth amidst external headwinds," Chinabank Research said in a statement.

University of the Philippines Diliman School of Labor and Industrial Relations Assistant Professor Benjamin B. Velasco, in a Facebook comment, said the month-on-month uptick in the jobless rate could be due to the loss of seasonal jobs in construction and trade.

"The loss of jobs in those sectors could not be compensated by higher temporary employment created by the election season — falls under the administrative and support service activities," Mr. Velasco said.

Federation of Free Workers Vice-President Julius H. Cainglet said the rise in the underemployment rate could be due to Filipinos looking for extra work.

"Workers seek additional jobs since the wages in their existing jobs are not enough to sustain their family's needs. They need living wages, not starvation wages," Mr. Cainglet said in a Viber message.

Chinabank Research said the rise in underemployment shows the need for more quality jobs for Filipinos.

Mr. Velasco said that the annual increase in employment in the education sector shows the need for new teachers as the student population grows.

"The (increase in) administrative and support services is due to temporary employment related to elections. There are thousands of ward leaders and so-called volunteers doing paid work for candidates," Mr. Velasco added. — **A.H.Halili**

Infrastructure,
from S1/1

By 2050, DEPDev sees the country's GNI per capita reaching $18,336, with a population of 136 million and a median age of 37 years.

The Philippines is currently classified as a lower middle-income country based on latest World Bank data.

According to the World Bank's classification, an economy is considered lower middle income if the GNI per capita level is $1,146 to $4,515.

Upper middle-income countries are those that have a GNI per capita of $4,516 to $14,005.

FREE TRADE

Meanwhile, Mr. Balisacan said the Philippines should continue pursuing free trade agreements with as many countries.

"My view is that we should be opening more FTAs. Not just with the US, but with many countries. And do it fast. Because that's where many of our neighbors are going."

He noted that Singapore has an FTA with nearly all countries. The best strategy would be to forge bilateral and multiregional FTAs, he added.

Prior to the tariff orders, the Philippines had been seeking to secure a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States.

Earlier this year, the Department of Trade and Industry said that it will double down on securing an FTA with the US.

Mr. Balisacan said the country should negotiate an FTA with the United States amid these tariff orders.

"It's hard to negotiate on a piecemeal basis because that can distort your tariff trade policy. When you negotiate, you should look at... the net effect, and be able to see that in the end, you'll get better results."

Nine medical technology firms expected to register with PEZA within the year

NINE medical technology companies will pursue registrations with the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) within the year, according to the Medical Device Association of the Philippines (MDAP).

MDAP President Luis Ramon V. Rodriguez said attracting investment from original equipment manufacturers and device assemblers will help reduce import dependence.

"There are companies that are trying to find their way to PEZA to do assembly. There is a Malaysian company, a Taiwanese company, an Israeli company, and a Korean company," he said.

The companies include LKL International Bhd, Graceheal Medic Sdn Bhd, Star Medik Group, Bell Comm International, EPI Academy, Tyson Bio, Karuna Enterprise Sdn, Man&Tel Co. Ltd., and Tuttnauer.

PEZA Director General Tereso O. Panga said that aside from the medical device companies, some Malaysian pharmaceutical companies are also looking at setting up manufacturing operations in economic zones.

"So out of the nine companies, it is LKL that is ready for filing. It is a big Malaysian company specializing in hospital furniture and beds. The others are expected to apply this year," he said via Viber.

"LKL has found an ecozone location; it is not Victoria Industrial Park (VIP), but I will convince the others to locate in VIP," he added, referring to the country's first pharmaceutical ecozone.

According to Mr. Rodriguez, the Philippine medical device market is forecast at P130 billion this year.

"However, we are too dependent on imports. I think (import dependence) is 99.2%, so almost everything," he said, noting that the sources of imports are China, Japan, the US, South Korea, and Indonesia.

He said that currently local production is limited to prototype units and disposables such as surgical gloves, syringes, and needles.

"So hopefully we can have companies that would come to the Philippines and do assembly or even manufacture," he added.

According to Mr. Rodriguez, opportunities lie in digital health and artificial intelligence integration, local manufacturing, and innovation. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Solicited bid considered for air navigation control system

THE Department of Transportation (DoTr) is considering whether to offer an air traffic navigation project via the solicited route, the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Center said.

PPP Center Deputy Executive Director Jeffrey I. Manalo said the DoTr is in the pre-feasibility study stage in deciding on a solicited scheme.

The PPP Center website describes the Air Traffic Services (ATS)-Air Navigation Services (ANS) project as including the financing, design, construction, operations and maintenance of the system, which will regulate Philippine airspace as well as international airspace that the Philippines is responsible for managing.

"The private sector concessionaire would take over, modernize, and upgrade existing ATS-ANS facilities of the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines, including radar, communications facilities, and control centers. The private sector concessionaire will also construct new facilities to cover the country's airspace," the PPP Center said.

ComClark Network and Technology Corp. has said that it intends to resubmit its unsolicited proposal to take over the management of the Philippine air navigation, traffic, and control system.

ComClark's P29.82-billion unsolicited proposal was rejected by the DoTr. The company said in February that it will submit additional documents to complete its unsolicited proposal.

The PPP Center's Mr. Manalo said ComClark has made no new submissions to date.

Nigel Paul C. Villarete, senior advisor at technical advisory group Libra Konsult, Inc. said the air traffic navigation project must be offered through solicited mode.

"This kind of project is broader in scope, covering the entire national airspace and includes certain security concerns. The government needs to provide and embed specific security measures in the terms of reference," Mr. Villarete said via Viber.

"It should be noted that air navigation services have a much wider scope than airport services and also encompass broader national security concerns; thus, it would be in the country's best interest to prepare the Terms of Reference and make the decision to tender this out for PPP once that decision has been made," he said.

Mr. Villarete said going the solicited route would be faster and beneficial for the government.

"In the unsolicited mode, the proposal is dictated by what the proponent wants. So if a government agency wants to go into public-private-partnership, why not just bid it out specifying exactly what it wants rather than wait for some private entity to dictate its offer," he said. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**