

DICT seeks \$500-M WB loan for middle-mile fiber

THE Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) said it is seeking a \$500-million loan from the World Bank (WB) to finance the middle-mile fiber component of the national broadband project.

"This is just a study for this year. If ever, we plan to use this for next year. The Department of Finance (DoF) gave the go signal to explore and negotiate this loan," Information and Communications Technology Secretary Henry Rhoel R. Aguda told reporters on the sidelines of a recent event.

The DICT said the loan proceeds will be deployed next year pending the completion of phases 4 and 5, the final stages of the national fiber backbone.

The DICT expects to complete the phases 4 and 5 this year. The Philippines obtained a \$287.24-million loan from the World Bank to accelerate those phases.

The project is expected to bring high-speed internet connectivity to Mindanao by delivering 1,000 kilometers of high-speed, government-owned fiber to Butuan, Cagayan de Oro, Zamboanga, and Davao.

The National Broadband Plan has five components, with the first part of the fiber backbone connecting Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.

Component 2 of the national broadband plan includes the cable landing stations that make up the Luzon Bypass Infrastructure, which serve as the gateway to international connectivity.

Component 3 covers the middle-mile and last-mile segments of the network, as well as the tower build-up in geographically isolated areas. The middle-mile segment connects the backbone to the last mile, allowing the services to be delivered to end-users. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Rice prices seen remaining stable throughout Iran crisis

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said prices of rice will remain stable in the following months, with the risks posed by the Iran crisis on farmers' fuel and transport costs offset by inventory levels boosted by the ongoing harvest as well as imports.

At a briefing, Agriculture Assistant Secretary and Spokesman Arnel V. de Mesa said the rice harvest in March and April will keep supply ample until the lean months of August to September.

"Plus, the imports that came in during the first two months totaled almost 700 thousand metric tons (MT). We're expecting, for March and April, an additional 300 thousand MT," Mr. de Mesa said.

He said regular-milled rice prices will average about P40 per kilogram, domestically grown

well-milled rice P45, imported regular rice P48, and imported well-milled rice P52-P55.

"For now, there is no indication that we will hit (P60 per kilo for imported rice)."

Mr. de Mesa also said the DA does not foresee significant price movements at retail level because Philippine rice imports do not need to transit the waters affected by the fighting around Iran, unlike energy imports.

"For imported rice, 60-70% is from Vietnam. And then, the rest is also from Southeast Asia. Pakistan accounts for a small portion," he said, noting that any disruption to Pakistan grain shipments can be filled by Vietnam.

Mr. de Mesa said the main areas of concern are indirect effects like the cost of fuel absorbed by farmers.

Separately, Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said oil prices will rise with extended fighting, affecting petroleum-based fertilizers, freight costs, and fuel.

To cushion the impact of rising fuel prices, the DA will release P100 million in fuel subsidies for farmers and fisherfolk, with an additional P50 million available if crude oil price benchmarks hit \$80 per barrel.

The subsidy program, authorized by DA 2025 Memorandum Circulars 35 and 42, farmers are to receive P5,000 each while fisherfolk will get P3,000. The funds are expected to be distributed to 14,354 farmers and 14,947 fisherfolk.

To qualify, farmers must be in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) and own or rent machinery. Fisherfolk must be registered in RS-

BSA or the Fisheries Registration System, own boats not exceeding three gross tons, and use fishing gear compliant with fishery laws.

The subsidy will be distributed through Intervention Monitoring Cards issued by the Development Bank of the Philippines. The cards can only be used to purchase fuel at designated stations and cannot be withdrawn as cash or used for other purposes.

For areas far from fuel stations, the DA will issue vouchers worth P3,000 for fisherfolk and P5,000 for farmers.

Mr. de Mesa said registration of eligible beneficiaries has started, with the target to complete distribution by March to April, in time for the next cropping season starting in May to June. — **Pierce Oel A. Montalvo**



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