

PHL, Paraguay sign visa-waiver deal, explore agricultural trade prospects

THE PHILIPPINES and Paraguay agreed to explore expanded trade in agricultural goods, with the proposed exchange involving exports of tuna, sardines and milkfish, in exchange for grain, oilseeds and agro-industrial products.

The proposals were aired during the visit by Paraguay President Santiago Peña Palacios to Manila, the first such visit since diplomatic relations were established in 1962.

"I raised the possibilities of Philippine export of tuna, sardines,

milkfish, and other products to Paraguay, which will certainly give a boost to our local industry," President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. said after their meeting.

"The Philippines views itself as a gateway to Asia and Paraguay a gateway to Latin America," he added.

The two sides agreed to waive visa requirements for holders of ordinary passports, establishing a reciprocal arrangement that allows visa-free entry for passport holders to support business,

tourism, and people-to-people exchanges between Manila and Asuncion, the Palace said.

Paraguay's Mr. Peña said its offerings can help address the Philippines' food-security concerns, while offering "competitive conditions for the maquila industry," referring to foreign-owned manufacturing operations that enjoy duty-free import privileges for products that will subsequently be exported. He also cited "attractive incentives for foreign investment, and a logistic platform

in full expansion thanks to the Bioceanic Corridor, positioning us as a natural bridge between the Atlantic and the Pacific."

He said Paraguay has conveyed its intention to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

"This decision reflects our firm determination to integrate into the regional dialogue and cooperation mechanisms in line with the principles of peace, respect for sovereignty, and the peaceful settlement of disputes that have

historically guided Paraguay's foreign policy," he said.

"It is an opportunity that we must seize with determination to advance a more structural dialogue between both regions," Mr. Peña said.

Paraguay holds the Pro Tempore Presidency of MERCOSUR or the Southern Common Market, the South American free-trade bloc. The Philippines currently chairs the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

According to the Presidential Communications Office, total

trade with Paraguay in 2025 amounted to \$2.2 million, with exports at \$1.9 million and imports at \$322,400.

In 2025, the Philippines logged 220 tourist arrivals from Paraguay, up from 191 recorded a year earlier.

Filipinos resident in Paraguay numbered 63, most of them based in Asuncion, largely composed of teachers, professionals and permanent residents married to locals. — **Chloe Mari A. Hufana**

PHL, South Korea sign MoU to enforce competition law

THE Philippine Competition Commission (PCC) said it signed an agreement with the Korea Fair Trade Commission (KFTC) to boost the enforcement of competition law in both jurisdictions.

The memorandum of understanding (MoU), signed on May 8, creates a framework for bilateral coordination and consultation on ensuring enforcement of competition law.

"By signing this MoU, both agencies institutionalize a stronger partnership to explore new areas of collaboration, signifying a mutual commitment to fostering fair and competitive markets in both the Philippines and South Korea," the PCC said in a statement.

PCC Chairman Michael Aguinaldo and KFTC Chairman Biung-Ghi Ju signed the MoU on the sidelines of the 2026 International Competition Network Annual Conference.

The MoU calls for the PCC and KFTC to exchange information, best practices, and experiences, subject to their respective national laws, regulations, and confidentiality requirements.

It also details protocols for notifications involving enforcement activities, as well as the appointment of official liaisons.

South Korea was the Philippines' second-biggest source of imports at the end of March valued at \$4.08 billion, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. It was 7th among leading destinations for Philippine-made goods, worth \$1.01 billion.

In March, the Philippines and South Korea signed key agreements aimed at boosting cooperation in defense procurement, veterans affairs, agriculture, trade, investment, intellectual property, digital cooperation, digitalization and innovation. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

DA preparing for severe dry spell after forecast of 'strong' El Niño

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said preparations are being put in place for what it called a potentially strong El Niño, citing the weather event's potential to reduce farm output and disrupt the food supply.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said the DA is applying lessons from the 2024 El Niño episode, including promoting less water-intensive crops, expanding the use of solar-powered irrigation and low-cost greenhouses, and encouraging earlier planting.

"What we learned during the 2024 El Niño will guide how we prepare and intervene this time

around," Mr. Laurel said in a statement on Monday.

The DA added that the National Rice Program and the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund are being tapped for the distribution of climate-resilient seed, fertilizer support, farm mechanization, irrigation assistance, and farmer training.

Also underway are irrigation system assessments, climate risk mapping, localized planning, and the prepositioning of drought-tolerant seed and other inputs.

It added that crop insurance, credit access, and market facilitation programs are being readied, with the government's

El Niño Task Force being reactivated to improve inter-agency coordination.

The DA has warned that a severe El Niño could cut agricultural production by 20% to 30%, citing recent studies.

Agricultural output contracted by 0.3% year on year in the first quarter, as declines in palay production offset gains in poultry and livestock, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported.

Apart from weather-related risks, the DA also cited supply disruptions and higher input costs linked to the war in the Middle East as additional pressures on the farming.

To help secure rice supply in the event of production shortfalls, the DA said the Philippines and Vietnam have reaffirmed a rice supply arrangement.

The DA said the arrangement would allow the Philippines, if necessary, to purchase up to 1.5 million metric tons of rice from Vietnam at competitive prices.

Mr. Laurel said actual import volumes will still depend on domestic production and market conditions.

He added that the government will continue balancing food security needs with efforts to support farmgate prices for palay (unmilled rice). — **Vonn Andrei E. Villamil**

PHL urged to step up pace of reforms before society ages

THE PHILIPPINES must pick up the pace of reforms to achieve high-income status before the rapidly ageing population erodes the economy's growth potential, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) said.

"The Philippines is expected to become an ageing society in 2030 but has yet to transition to the upper middle-income category and may be far from being a high-income one," it said in a report.

"This means that existing economic, human resource, and system constraints will persist at least in the medium term," it added.

The government had set a goal of becoming a high-income economy in the AmBisyon Nation 2040 plan.

The World Bank currently classifies the Philippines as a lower middle-income country with gross national income per capita of \$4,470, just \$26 below the upper middle-income bracket of \$4,496-\$13,935.

The Philippine Statistics Authority reported the total fertility rate at a record low of 1.7 children per woman in the 2023-2025 period. Demographers consider a fertility rate of below 2.1 to indicate that the population is not renewing itself, suggesting a falling share of young, working-age people.

"To help address the gaps and seize some opportunities, systemic reform (is needed). Efforts to significantly improve productivity in an inclusive manner are crucial," it said.

"These entail substantial investment in human capital, industry and infrastructure which can only be realized in the long term," it added.

Over the short- and medium-term, however, the think tank urged the government to invest in human capital, care infrastructure, and industry.

"The government and other stakeholders must invest in building and upgrading public care facilities for children, older persons,

and persons with disabilities in underserved regions," it said.

"There is a need to prioritize rural areas and low-income communities to close the urban-rural divide in access to early childhood care, elderly long-term care, disability rehabilitation services and other care facilities," it added.

The government was also advised to expand investment in public care facilities, specialized health services, and care professionals for ageing and disability.

"The government will have to be more strategic in its approaches given its limited resources and explore innovative ways of financing care infrastructure investments such as public-private partnership (PPP) arrangements," it said.

"Existing mandated allocations like the Gender and Development Fund, Special Education Fund, and Local Development Fund can be used more strategically to raise funds for local government investment in care programs and facilities," it added.

PIDS also recommended reviewing the mandatory retirement age of 65 to encourage longer workforce participation.

"The mandatory retirement age of 65 must be reviewed (because) it may be preventing older, but otherwise healthy and capable, persons from being gainfully employed," it said.

"The idea is to make the retirement age less strict or optional and to encourage people to work longer for them to gain better capacity to meet their basic needs in old age," it added.

The think tank further cited the need for a comprehensive care framework, pointing to the nearly finalized National Care Economy Policy Framework.

"It is vital that the final version contains strategies that are implementable and with funding, that it has clear scope and boundaries and is coherent with national development objectives," it added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

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