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Marcos: Draw inspiration from acts of courage, bayanihan this New Year

MANILA – President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. has extended his heartfelt New Year's greetings to Filipinos across the country and abroad, urging them to draw inspiration from acts of courage, compassion, and bayanihan (spirit of commu-

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President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. (PNA file photo)

Minimum wage up in 14 regions, benefits 5M workers

MANILA – Close to five million private sector workers who are minimum wage earners will directly benefit from wage increases approved by 14 Regional Tripartite Wage Productivity Boards (RTWPBs) in 2024.

Data from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) revealed that 4,907,584 minimum wage earners in the private sector have been granted daily wage increases.

The wage hikes range from PHP21 to PHP75.

The RTWPBs issued wage orders in the National Capital Region (NCR), Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), and Regions 1 (Ilocos), 2 (Cagayan Valley), 3 (Central Luzon), 4-A (Calabarzon), 4-B (Mimaropa).

The other areas that were granted wage adjustments were Regions 6 (Western Visayas), 7 (Central Visayas), 8 (Eastern

Visayas), 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula), 10 (Northern Mindanao), 12 (Soccsksargen and 13 (Caraga).

NCR workers

On June 27, RTWPB-NCR issued Wage Order NCR-25, granting a PHP35 increase. It will benefit some four million workers.

The order raised the minimum wage in Metro Manila to PHP645 from PHP610.

Meanwhile, Northern Mindanao was the lat-

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(PNA file photo by Ben Briones)

DHSUD addresses housing woes, disaster concerns in 2024

MANILA – The Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD) started the delivery of the first batch of housing units under national housing program before 2024 ended.

Launched in September 2022, the Pam-bansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino Housing (4PH) Program was declared President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s flagship program by virtue of Executive Order (EO) 34.

It shifted the national housing program to vertical or multi-story buildings to maximize land use.

“Ang 4PH po ang nabuo nating formula para lutasin ang housing backlog. Kailangan lamang po na hanapan ng paraan para mas bilisan ang mga pro-se-so at ma-maximize ang resources ng gobyerno (The 4PH's formula was created to solve our housing backlog. We just need to find ways to speed up the processes and maxi-

mize the government's resources),” DHSUD Secretary Jose Rizalino Acuzar said.

The program primarily spends private funds, receiving wide support from local government units, government financial institutions, private banks, and developers and contractors.

On Dec. 17, Marcos awarded the first batch of 4PH units to overseas Filipino workers at Malacañan Palace in Manila, in collaboration with the



MEETING WITH OFWs. President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos lead the “Pamaskong Handog Para sa Pamilyang Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)” at Malacañan Palace in Manila on Dec. 17, 2024. Marcos awarded the first batch of 4PH units to the OFWs. (Photo courtesy of MPC Pool)

DHSUD, Department of Migrant Workers, Presidential Communications Office and other concerned government agencies.

“Simula na po ito ng

tuluy-tuloy na turnover at delivery ng 4PH units. Sa mga susunod na buwan ay marami pang 4PH units ang ating i-aaward (This is the start of continuous

turn over and delivery of 4PH units. More 4PH units will be awarded in the coming months),” Acuzar said.

A total of 56 projects are simultaneously being developed and constructed in different parts of the country. Some condominium-type buildings are already completed and ready for distribution. **Disaster response, urban renewal**

The DHSUD launched the Integrated Disaster Shelter Assistance Program (IDSAP) and the distribution of housing materials and essentials (HOMEs) to aid calamity victims.

Under IDSAP, un-

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est region to grant an increase in the minimum wage.

Wage Order No. RX-23 issued by RTWPB-10 for private sector workers granted an increase of PHP23 for the non-agriculture sector and PPH35.00 for the agriculture sector to be given in two tranches.

The wage adjustment will bring the minimum wage rates in the region from PHP446 to PHP461 upon full implementation. The increase will be effective on Jan. 12, 2025 while the second tranche will start July 1, 2025.

Domestic workers

On the other hand, domestic workers or household helps in nine regions were similarly granted increases in their salaries ranging from PHP500 to P1,100.

There are a total of 717,508 domestic workers in the regions of Metro Manila, Cordillera, 1, 2, Mimaropa, 6, 8, 10 and Caraga.

Recently, the Metro Manila wage board issued Wage Order No. NCR-DW-05 granting a PHP500 monthly increase for household helps across the region.

The monthly minimum wage in the sector is now PHP7,000.

Amended guidelines

The National Wages and Productivity Commission (NWPC) Resolution No. 05 issued in May 2024 amended Rule IV of Guidelines No. 03, Series of 2020, or the Omnibus Rules on Minimum Wage Determination.

This allowed the RTWPBs to not only initiate review within the 60-day period prior to their wage order anniversary but also to issue a new one, if necessary, provided the same will not take effect within the 12-month period from their last wage order's

effectivity.

Four RTWPBs (3, 4-A, 7, and 10) assisted by the NWPC simplified their wage structures and successfully implemented streamlining in accordance with the Omnibus Rules, as amended, and NWPC Resolution No. 04, Series of 2024 which encourages the RTWPBs to regularly review their wage classifications to ensure consistency with socioeconomic demographics.

According to the DOLE, the initiative aims to ensure clarity and enhance minimum wage compliance, ultimately supporting a more efficient and transparent wage system for both employers and workers.

Additionally, the RTWPBs have been instructed to roll out productivity improvement programs and gainsharing schemes designed to foster sustainable and long-term wage growth.

These programs particularly target areas within the regions with lower productivity levels, where their implementation can significantly enhance overall efficiency.

2 regions yet to issue wage hikes

Two RTWPBs (5 or Bicol and 11 or Davao) have yet to issue wage orders.

Region 5 has resolved to defer the minimum wage determination process due to the impact of Severe Tropical Storm Kristine in October that left Bicol in a state of calamity.

It will resume the process as soon as circumstance permits or after three months from Nov. 7, 2024 or in February 2025.

On the other hand, RTWPB-XI is still conducting consultations with various stakeholders in the region, the outcomes of which will be factored

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nity and cooperation) as the nation embarks on the journey into 2025.

In his New Year's message, Marcos acknowledged the challenges the country faced in the previous months, particularly in the wake of calamities that disrupted communities and upended lives.

Despite these adversities, the President emphasized Filipinos' resilience, underscoring the importance of solidarity and perseverance in the face of hardships.

"Reflecting on the resilience we have shown in overcoming them, it is crucial for our progress to esteem such moments as hallmarks of the extraordinary strength we gain through solidarity and perseverance," Marcos said.

"As we move forward

into their minimum wage determination process scheduled for January 2025.

Relief mechanism

The DOLE, through the NWPC, reiterated the guidelines that provide for an exemption mechanism for calamity-affected enterprises following the several typhoons that hit the country and caused significant challenges to businesses in affected areas.

It noted that enterprises may inquire and apply through the RTWPB with jurisdiction over their business areas whether they may be eligible for a full exemption or a specific minimum wage tranche, if any.

Businesses and workers are encouraged to visit the NWPC website at <https://nwpc.dole.gov.ph/> or follow the NWPC Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/dole.nwpc/> for more details on the exemption pro-

cess. into 2025, we look ahead with renewed hope and optimism knowing that our experiences will guide us into building a future filled with promise and purpose," he added.

"Let us draw inspiration from the innumerable acts of courage, compassion, and bayanihan that we have witnessed in the face of adversity," he went on.

Only then, according to the President, can "we fortify the bonds that connect us, truly rebuild what has been lost, and realize a Bagong Pilipinas where dreams flourish and every Filipino thrives."

The Chief Executive highlighted that the New Year is a time for personal reflection and growth, a chance to strike a balance between learning from the past and embracing

cess.

Likewise, the Department urged businesses and workers to avail of its existing programs, such as the Adjustment Measures Program (AMP), and take full advantage of the opportunities available.

The AMP aims to reduce and mitigate the vulnerability of workers and enterprises to economic disruptions, including those resulting from natural calamities.

"As 2024 ends, the NWPC remains committed to supporting the Marcos administration in maintaining a regular and predictable schedule for wage review, with a continued focus on a fair and transparent wage determination process; simplifying wage structures, and promoting productivity improvement programs to foster long-term wage and productivity growth," it said. (PNA)

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be sold at PHP35/kg. to PHP36/kg.; while "nutri" rice, which is neither white nor brownish local rice, will be sold at PHP36/kg. to PHP37/kg.

The DA also plans to remove brand labels on imported rice to prevent profiteering, citing that some importers and retailers take advantage of the "special" and "premium" rice labels to sell at a higher price range.

Moreover, the DA is also looking into setting up a three-year budget plan for its big-ticket projects for cold storage and irri-

the possibilities of tomorrow.

"It is our desire for our citizens to embrace this outlook and adopt an introspective and growth-focused mindset that balances the realities of yesterday and the promises of tomorrow," he said. (PNA)

gation.

"I am looking forward to implementing all our projects next year from cold storage to solar irrigation. Lyong (The) change of planting calendar, increasing planting intensity to 2.5 from 1.8. So, I think we can produce more and stabilize the prices," Tiu Laurel said.

The modification of the planting calendar aims to boost local production by reducing harvest losses due to natural calamities during typhoon months from September to October, making the average annual losses range from 500,000 MT to 600,000 MT of palay.

Under the new cropping calendar, rice farmers will secure higher yields in irrigated areas with a second crop to be harvested in May and June, just in time before the onset of the rainy season. (PNA)

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Environmental group urges proper disposal of unused fireworks

MANILA – An anti-chemical pollution advocacy group on Thursday urged the public not to keep unused firecrackers and fireworks at home and to dispose them properly.

“Ang mga hindi nag-amit na fireworks and firecrackers, hindi rin maganda na iniimbak ‘yan (It is not good to store unused firecrackers and fireworks),” Ecowaste Coalition national coordinator Aileen Lucero said in a press conference at the Tondo Medical Center in Manila City.

She warned that such items can cause fire, injury, and poisoning, especially among children.

“Maganda na ibabad yan sa tubig (It is best to soak them in water) in preparation for disposal,” she added.

Firecrackers and fireworks are classified as

hazardous waste.

They must be submerged in water for at least five minutes to ensure they can no longer be lighted.

They must also be placed in a separate container with proper label to keep them from mixing up with other waste.

Lucero noted they can contaminate other wastes which can still be decomposed or recycled.

“Pero ‘yung tubig huwag niyo po ide-derecho sa canal dahil magiging hazardous naman ang mga ilog at dagat natin (Don’t throw the water directly into canals because it can be hazardous to rivers and seas),” she said.

“Maganda ibuhos iyan sa mga lupa dahil may mga halaman naman nakakaalis ng mga toxins (It is better

to pour them onto the soil because there are plants that can remove the toxins),” she added.

Lucero emphasized that adults must perform the proper handling of firecrackers and fireworks to prevent unwanted injuries or even death.

As of Jan. 2, the Department of Health recorded 534 fireworks-related injuries with four fatalities.

It added that 322 cases involved victims aged 19 and below, while 212 were 20 years old and above and 443 are males and 91 are females.

“Kwitis” or skyrockets are now the primary cause of fireworks related injuries, followed by “boga” or improvised cannons, unknown firecrackers, five star and whistle bomb. (PNA)

Recto wants PhilHealth benefit package tripled for top 10 illnesses

MANILA – Department of Finance (DOF) Secretary Ralph Recto proposed on Monday to significantly increase the benefit packages of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) for the 10 most common illnesses.

Increasing PhilHealth’s benefit packages for the top 10 diseases will ensure that the state health insurer’s funds are being effectively utilized, Recto said during a press conference at the Malacañan Palace in Manila following the signing of the 2025 General Appropriations Act (GAA).

“Maybe we should focus on the top 10 illnesses. I think that’s it. Let’s increase the benefit package for the top 10 illnesses by 100 percent, even 200 percent. This would



PNA file photo by Joan Bondoc

greatly benefit the public,” he said.

PhilHealth did not get any subsidy allocation under the 2025 GAA signed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.

Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman explained that the President can only delete line items in the enrolled bill but cannot put additional allocations.

Recto said PhilHealth has PHP280 billion in reserve funds.

“My understanding is

that, Congress did that because the operating budget of PhilHealth is sufficient,” he said.

“They have a surplus of roughly PHP150 billion the last time I looked at it. They have investments of more than PHP400 billion. They will probably earn PHP200 billion in 2025. They will spend the 150 billion.”

He said the DOF will closely monitor PhilHealth’s expenditure to ensure that funds are effectively utilized next year. (PNA)

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generators that have been highly utilized not just as a stable source of power supply and internet connection for disaster responders, but also to disaster-affected communities.

Ready-to-eat food

The DSWD also launched its ready-to-eat food (RTEF) in 2024, the first ever of its kind in the country, particularly intended to supplement free food provision to disaster-hit families.

The RTEF was introduced as the new addition to the agency’s relief items, which will be distributed to affected families within 24 to 48 hours after the onset of a disaster.

The DSWD will start prepositioning RTEF in seaports by 2025 to fa-

cilitate the seamless food provision for stranded passengers in times of disasters, including other strategically identified storage facilities nationwide.

Climate change mitigation

From July 2023 to May 2024, El Niño conditions were observed in the tropical Pacific Ocean and its effects were felt in the Philippines resulting in agricultural damages and water shortages reported in various Regions.

In response, the DSWD recalibrated its Risk Resiliency Program (RRP) and launched Project Local Adaptation to Water Access (LAWA) and Breaking Insufficiency through Nutritious Harvest for the Impoverished (BINHI).

“The twin project was particularly designed to mitigate the impact of food insecurity and water scarcity caused by the El Niño while preparing for the potential effects of the rainy season,” Dumlao said.

The gains of LAWA and BINHI were showcased in a national convention in the last quarter of 2024, reporting that the project has helped over 137,654 beneficiaries from 310 localities across the country for this year alone.

A total of 1,842 LAWA facilities were able to irrigate more than 7,234 hectares of agricultural land by providing a viable source of water to communities most affected by drought and climate change.

A total of 4,317 BINHI

DOH: Fireworks-related injuries down 64% at 340 as of Jan. 1

MANILA – The Department of Health (DOH) recorded a total of 340 fireworks-related injuries (FWRI) from Dec. 22, 2024 to 6 a.m. of Jan. 1, 2025.

This was after 141 additional cases from 46 out of the 62 sentinel sites were reported as the country welcomed the New Year.

The overall tally is 64 percent lower compared to the 519 FWRI recorded on

sites were also established this year which were able to harvest over 21,014,574 kilos of produce that helped feed more than 810,756 families.

The project was hailed

Jan. 1, 2024.

About 202 cases or 59 percent were caused by illegal firecrackers like boga (improvised cannon), five star and piccolo. Meanwhile, 186 or 54.7 percent of the cases were active users or they lit the firecrackers themselves.

Two hundred thirty-nine cases involved victims aged 19 and below, while 101 were 20 years old and

by the United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) as one of the best practices to minimize the effects of the climate crisis, particularly the El Niño. (Jose Cielito Reganit/PNA)

above. Two hundred ninety-nine are males while 41 are females.

The DOH continued to remind the public to avoid illegal fireworks to keep them safe from injuries, blindness, loss of hearing, burns, and loss of body parts. (PNA)

For God is not unrighteous so as to forget your work and the love you showed for his name by ministering and continuing to minister to the holy ones.

Hebrews 6: 10

DSWD distributes 8M food packs to 7M disaster-hit families in 2024

MANILA – More than 8 million boxes of family food packs (FFPs) were distributed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to 6,864,735 families who were affected by the series of disasters across the country in 2024, an official reported on Wednesday.

DSWD Assistant Secretary for Disaster Response Management Group (DRMG) Irene Dumlao said these food packs were part of the 10 million boxes of FFPs produced in record time by the National Resource Operations Center (NROC) in Pasay City and the Visayas Disaster Response Center (VDRC) in Mandaue City, Cebu province.

“While we can relatively attribute this huge number to the severity of tropical cyclones and other calamities, we also see this as a result of our enhanced disaster response operations and stronger collaboration with partner-agencies that enabled us to reach more affected-families,” Dumlao said.

From January to early October 2024, the DSWD focused on humanitarian efforts for families affected by Typhoons Aghon and Butchoy, Severe Tropical Storms Carina and Enteng, Typhoons Ferdie and Gener, Tropical Storm Helen and Tropical Depression Julian, as well as major fires, earthquakes, and volcanic incidents.

“The successive storms that started with Kristine, followed by Leon, Marce, Nika, Ofel and Pepito, and the recent eruption of Kanlaon, increased the number of affected families who were aided by the DSWD,” Dumlao said.



CONTINUOUS REPLENISHMENT. Department of Social Welfare and Development staff and volunteers are busy repacking family food packs (FFPs) at the Visayas Disaster Resource Center (VDRC) in Mandaue City, Cebu province on Oct. 23, 2024. The VDRC and the National Resource Operations Center in Pasay City are continuously engaged in the repacking and hauling of family FFPs to ensure that communities affected by calamities receive immediate relief and support. (Photo courtesy of DSWD)

The DRMG official reported that 524,334 families were also provided with the agency's Cash-for-Work (CFW), Food for Work (FFW), and Emergency Cash Transfer (ECT) programs.

The ECT recipients were given outright cash aid to help them purchase their priority needs and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

The CFW and FFW beneficiaries were given cash or food after participating in community work and training activities.

1,000 storage facilities

In line with initiatives to fast-track aid delivery in disaster-stricken areas, Dumlao said the DSWD now has close to 1,000 storage facilities nationwide, which include warehouses, hubs, spokes, and last mile facilities.

“The strategic expansion of our warehousing capacity falls under the Buong Bansa Handa (BBH) Project, which establishes two parallel supply chain

mechanisms to ensure comprehensive coverage and timely assistance to affected families in all disaster-affected areas,” she said.

The first mechanism features a national and local government-driven supply chain that seeks to increase the production capacities and processes of the NROC and VDRC, and the warehouse and storage facilities across the 16 Field Offices.

For the second mechanism, the department forged partnerships with established large and small groceries, supermarkets, manufacturers, and distributors to leverage on their technical expertise and resources to create a private sector-driven supply chain.

Mobile Command Centers

The year 2024 also showcased the agency's decisive efforts to disaster-proof its digital monitoring system and communication lines for disaster re-

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conditional cash assistance of PHP30,000 are provided to families whose houses are totally damaged.

Meanwhile, PHP10,000 are given to those with partially-damaged shelters due to calamity, either man-made or natural.

As of Dec. 13, more than PHP130 million of the PHP200 million IDSAP fund have been utilized to assist disaster victims. Some 6,000 families received the cash assistance.

HOMEs were distributed to thousands of families in Bicol Region following the onslaught of Severe Tropical Storm Kristine (international name Trami) in October.

Each kit is composed of galvanized iron sheets, plywood, lumber and nails, amounting to about PHP15,000 each.

The DHSUD was also tasked to lead the Inter-Agency Council for the Pasig River Urban Development (IAC-PRUD), which is in-charge of the Pasig Bigyang Buhay Muli (PBBM) Project.

It aims to bring back the glory of the waterway and maximize economic potentials through tourism and transportation connectivity.

The rehabilitation of

sponse and emergency operations through the launch of the Disaster Response Command Center (DRCC), and the Mobile Command Center (MCC).

“These were the projects that were closely spearheaded and supervised not just by our Secretary Rex Gatchalian. These were also shepherded through President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s vision of a technology-driven disaster management system,” Dumlao said.

the Pasig River and its tributaries was declared one of the national government's priorities by virtue of EO 35.

So far, the IAC-PRUD has opened the 500-meter showcase area at the back of the Manila Central Post Office up to the entrance of Intramuros near Plaza Mexico.

The Pasay City Staging Area was completed to ensure there is no displacement of informal settler families applying for 4PH. It has amenities like playground, commercial stalls and a day care center.

‘Planado’ program

In February, the DHSUD launched its nationwide Plan and Do (Planado) Program to enhance the land use planning and urban development in the country.

It focuses on two major outputs -- zero backlog on Comprehensive Land Use Plans (CLUP) and Provincial Development and Physical Framework Plans (PDPFP) by 2028, and to promote urban development for the next generation.

It also aims to streamline and digitalize land use and urban planning and development processes to create smart, green, resilient and inclusive human

In January 2024, the newly-renovated DRCC was unveiled, which coincided with the annual celebration of the DSWD's founding anniversary.

The DRCC utilizes advanced information and communication equipment/assets to ensure the seamless collaboration between the DSWD's Central Office, Field Offices (FOs), member-agencies of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC),

settlements.

From January to September 2024, the DHSUD issued license to sell (LS) to 367 projects, which equate to 143,301 residential units.

The issuance of LS protects homebuyers from unscrupulous developers and transactions since it requires the conformance of these projects with the prescribed standards.

A cumulative data of 138 CLUPs and PDPFPs for sustainable and resilient human settlements have been processed by the department as well.

Fifty-eight CLUPs and four PDPFPs were approved, while 65 CLUPs and 11 PDPFPs are for finalization, adoption and approval.

Meanwhile, 26,307 registered homeowners' associations, 224 federations and 36 confederations are registered and monitored around the country as of September 2024.

Acuzar said the department encountered challenges in terms of funding requirements and bureaucratic processes.

“That is why we formulated concepts and programs that can attract private funds. The government alone cannot solve the decades-old housing woes and the massive urbanization,” he said. (PNA)

and local government units (LGUs).

The DRCC was soon reinforced by the MCC and provided linkage from the disaster-stricken areas to the Regional Operations Center (ROC), Disaster Response Command Center (DRCC), or the Regional Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council (RDRRMC).

Each MCC is equipped with state-of-the-art satellite internet, gadgets, and

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Prompt actions alleviate effects of 'depressing' year for PH agri

MANILA – The prompt actions of the administration of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., through the Department of Agriculture (DA), have helped alleviate the effects of a “depressing” year in the agricultural sector.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. hailed the performance of the DA team despite the major challenges that have taken its toll on the country's local agricultural production, including the El Niño phenomenon, La Niña, successive typhoons, Mt. Kanlaon eruption, African swine fever (ASF), and a brewing bird flu, among others.

“The team that I have is very good. I'm happy with the team. I'm happy with the support of the President,” he said in a recent interview.

“I would say this is a depressing year in agriculture in a sense but of course, I think the DA, we've addressed iyong mga kailangang gawin (what's needed to be done). As far as DA is concerned, we have reacted quickly to the calamities that we've faced.”

These natural calamities have contributed to the decline of local palay (unhusked rice) output, which is projected to drop to 19.3 million metric tons (MMT) for 2024, according to the DA's Rice program.

Spiking rice retail prices also remained a challenge, prompting the administration to implement a tariff cut on imported rice to 15 percent from 35 percent under Executive Order (EO) 62.

With the tariff reduction in place, volume of rice imports reached a record high of 4.48 MMT as of Dec. 12 and is still projected to hit an all-time high of



(PNA photo)

4.7 MMT.

Besides the tariff cut, the Marcos administration also launched the DA's Kadiwa ng Pangulo (KNP) Rice for All and P29 programs to offer Filipinos cheaper rice options.

The Rice for All program sells mixed local and well-milled rice to the general public at PHP40/kg., with no purchase limits in KNP Centers and newly-opened kiosks in local markets, LRT, and MRT stations in Metro Manila.

Meanwhile, the P29 is dedicated for the vulnerable sector including members of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), senior citizens, persons with disabilities (PWD), and solo parents, offering aging but good quality rice stocks from the National Food Authority (NFA) which can be availed for PHP29/kg. at a 10-kg. purchase limit.

To sustain and expand the rollout of the two programs nationwide, the Office of the President (OP) approved PHP5 billion in unprogrammed funds for the DA, Tiu Laurel noted.

Of the budget, around PHP3 billion will be allocated for Rice for All; PHP1.5 billion for P29; and PHP500 million for rehabilitation of warehouses and logistics costs.

The agriculture chief said this may help further lower Rice for All costs starting in 2025.

“We will be buying rice from the traders, the farmers, farmer coops, from the importers, and sell it through the Kadiwa ng Pangulo at hopefully PHP38, PHP39,” Tiu Laurel said, citing plans to start utilizing the budget on Jan. 15.

For 2024, at least 170 KNP stores are expected to be operational; 300 by mid-2025; and 1,500 before the term of President Marcos ends.

Agri smuggling tamed

With intensified efforts in place, Tiu Laurel highlighted the elimination of agricultural smuggling, particularly on imported rice.

“Maraming (Many) policy changes from the system to import rice. Yung tingin ko na-eliminate na natin is (I think we have eliminated) maybe 90 plus percent of the smuggling that has been going on,” he said.

Since the implementation of tariff reduction, recorded volume imports increased even without the “considerable” population growth compared to the last two years.

“Lumalabas iyong data ng 2022 na 3.8 MMT and 3.5 MMT na in-import 2023 (It showed that the 2022 data of 3.8 MMT and 3.5 MMT imported in 2023) is wrong because of smuggling.

Ngayon umabot tayo ng (Now, we reached) 4.5 MMT. Of course,

nakatulong din diyan yung taripa (the tariff helped), because there's no point to smuggle anymore, just declare it,” Tiu Laurel said.

Meanwhile, the DA Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) blacklisted 10 firms for alleged involvement in illegal agri-trade practices.

Among the blacklisted companies include LVM Grains Enterprises, Kysse Lishh Consumer

Goods Trading, JRA and Pearl Enterprises Inc., Betron Consumer Goods Trading, RCNN Non-Specialized Wholesale Trading, and Golden Rays Consumer Goods Trading, which failed to secure sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances from BPI before importing vegetables, fruits, and other food products, according to the DA.

Unlicensed importers include Kysse Lishh, RCNN, Chastity Consumer Goods Trading, and Golden Rays.

Some licensed importers were also found to be involved in anti-competitive practices, price manipulation, and collusion, including La Reina Fresh Vegetables Young Indoor Plants Inc., Vegefru Producing Store, and Yom Trading Corp.

Tiu Laurel warned importers anew to cease engaging in illegal practices which serve as economic sabotage, citing the possibility of blacklisting five more firms including fish and meat importers.

Combating ASF

In terms of combating ASF, stringent measures have been put in place to prevent further spread across the country.

Efforts include strict implementation of border checkpoints in Metro Manila and nearby provinces, as well as the intensified government-con-

trolled vaccination using the AVAC live vaccines for healthy and ASF-negative hogs.

As of Dec. 6, areas with active ASF cases have been reduced to 365 barangays in 88 municipalities in Cordillera Administrative Region, Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Bicol, Central and Eastern Visayas, and Soccsksargen.

“Another major accomplishment, I think, would be how we tackled the ASF issue this year. Medyo maganda yung checkpoint na ginawa (the checkpoints that were placed are good) and we're constantly communicating with the LGUs and the stakeholders. Kaya hindi masyadong kumalat yung (That's why there's not much spread of) ASF. There's more cooperation between government and the private sector,” Tiu Laurel said.

In particular, the DA has distributed 10,000 doses of AVAC live vaccines under the emergency procurement; while the rollout of the 150,000 newly-purchased doses is ongoing.

Overall, the DA aims to distribute 490,000 doses of ASF vaccines.

Tiu Laurel expressed hopes to secure approval for commercial use of ASF vaccines for the first quarter of 2025 to further enhance the recovery of the swine industry.

“Next year, with this vaccine and the biosecurity, I expect a good recovery for the pork.”

Tiu Laurel said the plans are also in place to address the brewing threat of avian influenza (AI) in the country.

He said they intend to procure 30 million doses of vaccines worth PHP300-million in the coming year.

Besides pork and poultry products, the agri chief also high-

lighted the DA's achievement of taming prices of select commodities including onion and sugar.

Compared to over PHP700/kg. and more than PHP100/kg.-levels for onions and sugar in 2023, its prices are now stabilized to PHP100/kg. to PHP160/kg. range; and PHP74/kg. to PHP90/kg. price range, respectively.

Positive outlook

Tiu Laurel said the DA is approaching the new year with a positive outlook across the agriculture sector with more programs beneficial to both farmers and consumers.

For rice farmers, he said the DA will launch a “full-blown” scale of the Agri-puhunan at Pangtawid program which will serve as a funding mechanism with insurance per cropping period alongside contract farming.

“I think that is a very good program which was conceptualized in July... But next year by February for the next planting season we plan to cover 100,000 farmers,” Tiu Laurel said, citing previous rollout in the Cordilleras and Nueva Ecija.

The DA also plans to launch the sale of healthier and cheaper rice options through the “Nutri” and “Sulit” rice programs for consumers.

“To bring down the prices of well-milled rice, that's the biggest challenge,” he said.

The “sulit” rice, which is 100 percent broken but white, will

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Diminutive Caloy stands tallest for PH sports in 2024

MANILA – The Philippine News Agency picked five sports achievements that stood out among several other feats in 2024.

5. Meralco finally wins it all

After years of heart-break, Meralco finally won that coveted Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) championship, beating San Miguel for the Philippine Cup title.

All it took was an iconic mid-range jumper from Chris Newsome for the Bolts to finally break the ice.

"It's surreal for us," coach Luigi Trillo said during that fateful night of June 16 at Smart Araneta Coliseum in Quezon City.

In the ongoing 2024-2025 PBA season, Meralco remains a title contender even as the team is now in contention of making the East Asia Super League semifinals.

A new championship contender could spark a breath of fresh air for the pro league.

4. Mapua returns to NCAA apex

A 33-year wait for a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) title finally came to an end for Mapua as the team finally finished the story after three tries in the last four seasons.

From being the surprise package during the Season 97 bubble, the Cardinals are champs again in Season 100.

This time, there was no need for a Benny Cheng-esque game-win-



Carlos Yulo (PNA photo by Avito Dalan)

ner as Mapua swept College of St. Benilde in the best-of-three finals with both games ending up in blowout wins.

Clint Escamis proved to be the missing link for the Cardinals to return to glory as he deservedly won the Finals Most Valuable Player (MVP) trophy.

It was also a full-circle moment for coach Randy Alcantara, who was Cheng's teammate during Mapua's last championship run in 1991, as he won it all for his alma mater both as a player and a mentor.

3. Fnatic Onic PH's domination

Fnatic Onic Philippines (FNOP) had a late case for being a top sports story for 2024, thanks to an impressive run in the past six months.

FNOP's prominence began when they won the first 13 matches of the Mobile Legends Bang Bang Professional League Philippines Season 14, setting a new league record for the longest winning streak ever.

Their dominance continued to the playoffs, and after a hard-fought championship battle

against rookie team Aurora, FNOP finally raised the MPL Philippines championship trophy.

Earning direct qualification for the M6 World Championship, FNOP was not done yet and swept the entire tournament, only the second team to do so after Evos Legends in M1, en route to winning the world title and assuring that the M Series crown remains in the Philippines for the fifth straight edition.

"There's really just organization doon sa madness na nakikita natin kung paano maglaro 'yung mga player. It's very calculated (on how the players perform in the madness that we are seeing) and we pride ourselves in that fact. Gusto ko lang kasi talaga ma-highlight kung gaano katalino 'yung mga players and gaano sila kagaling mechanically, and 'yun ang nangyari (I just want to highlight how intelligent and mechanically good the players are, and that's what happened)," FNOP head coach Tony Sene-drin told the Philippine News Agency.

2. Creamline grand slam

PH to send 20 athletes to Asian Winter Olympics next month

MANILA – After winning three gold medals in the Paris Olympics, the Philippines is setting its sights on a first-ever medal at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

"We've already accomplished the dream in the Summer Olympics – three gold medals in consecutive games. And that dream we want to also achieve in the Winter Olympics," said Philippine Olympic Committee (POC) president Abraham "Bambol" Tolentino in a news release on Wednesday.

For starters, the Philippines will send 20 athletes to the 9th Asian Winter Games on Feb. 7 to 14 in Harbin, China.

There are no available accurate records as to how many Filipinos have competed in the first eight editions of the Asian Winter Games, but Tolentino believed the team to Harbin is the biggest.

"And our athletes are competing in six of the 11 sports on the Harbin

program," he said.

Marc Angelo Pfister, Enrico Gabriel Pfister, Christian Patrick Haller, Alan Beat Frei, Jessica Pfister, Benjo Delarmente, Kathleen Dubberstein, Leilani Dubberstein, Sheila Mariano and Anne Marie Bonache make up the team competing in curling, one of the most-watched winter sports discipline.

The Curling Winter Sports of the Philippines, which was established late last year, joined Philippine Skating Union and Philippine Ski and Snowboarding Association in the POC roster.

Other members of Team Philippines managed by chef de mission Richard Lim are Paolo Borromeo, Aleksandr Korovin, Cathryn Limketkai, Isabella Marie Gamez and Sofia Lexi Jacqueline Frank in figure skating; Francis Ceccarelli and Talullah Proulx in Alpine skiing; Laetaz Amihan Rabe in freestyle skiing; Peter Joseph Groseclose in

short track speed skating and Adrian Tongco in snowboarding.

A total of 64 events will be contested in Harbin, which also hosted in 1996. China organized the 3rd Asian Winter Games in Changchun (2007).

Japan has dominated the Asian Winter Games followed by China and Kazakhstan. It hosted the first edition in Sapporo (1986) and the last edition in Sapporo and Obihiro (2017).

Meanwhile, Italy will host the 25th Winter Olympics in the cities of Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo from Feb. 6 to 22, 2026.

"The Winter Olympics are as extremely tough as the Summer Olympics, but we have proven that it could be done," Tolentino said.

Weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz-Naranjo produced the country's first gold medal in Tokyo (2020) and gymnast Carlos Yulo delivered two golds in Paris (2024). (PNA)

Petecio and Aira Villegas bring home a bronze each.

In 2025, the country will host for the first time the FIVB Men's World Championship, featuring the world's top 32 teams, on Sept. 12 to 28 at Mall of Asia Arena in Pasay City and Smart Araneta Coliseum in Quezon City.

Philippine National Volleyball Federation president Ramon Suzara assured that all athletes, coaches, delegates and fans will "feel at home."

National athletes will also see action in the 9th Asian Winter Games in Harbin, China on Feb. 7-14; Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (dates to be announced); and the 33rd Southeast Asian Games in Thailand in December. (PNA)

Creamline stomped its dominance as the top team in the Premier Volleyball League (PVL) by becoming the first team to achieve a grand slam.

The Cool Smashers began their domination by beating sister team Choco Mucho Flying Titans for the All-Filipino Conference title.

Creamline then smashed Akari in the Reinforced Conference finals before completing the season treble by beating Cignal in the Invitational Conference finals.

Considering that their superstar Alyssa Valdez missed a good bunch of games due to an injury, other Cool Smashers stepped up, like Jema Galanza, Bernadeth Pons, Michele Gumbao and Kyle Negrito, earning themselves MVP honors either for a championship series or an entire conference.

With Alas Pilipinas becoming busy in the coming days, the 2025 PVL season already began in November in alignment with the International Volleyball Federation calendar.

Once again, Creamline is deemed the team to beat.

1. Caloy's two golds

The hands-down top sports story of the year is gymnast Carlos "Caloy" Yulo's twin golds in the Paris Olympics.

This news bit needs no further elaboration because winning an Olympic gold is already remarkable, more so doing it twice in the same edition.

Although it unraveled some family issues, there is no reason Yulo's double golds will not be the headliner of 2024 in Philippine sports.

The Paris stint also saw female boxers Nesthy