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BUDGET BRIEFINGS		
COMMITTEE	SUBJECT MATTER	DISCUSSIONS
Appropriations	Briefing on the proposed FY 2021 budget, plans and programs, and major accomplishments of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and its attached agencies	<p>The Committee, chaired by Rep. Eric Go Yap (Party-List, ACT-CIS), terminated its deliberations on the proposed FY 2021 budget of DFA and its attached agencies.</p> <p>Committee Vice Chair, Rep. "Kuya" Jose Antonio Sy-Alvarado (1st District, Bulacan), initially sat as the presiding officer during the continuation of the deliberations on the DFA's proposed budget. Rep. Manuel Jose "Mannix" Dalipe (2nd District, Zamboanga City) later took over until the end of the budget briefing.</p> <p>Based on the 2021 National Expenditure Program (NEP), the DFA is set to receive the amount of P22.09 billion, which is 9.31% lower than its current year's budget of P24.22 billion.</p> <p>Several lawmakers expressed their support for the increase in the budget of the DFA to allow it to effectively and efficiently perform its mandate.</p> <p>Rep. Rufus Rodriguez (2nd District, Cagayan de Oro City) asked which essential budget items should be restored in the proposed budget of the DFA.</p> <p>Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said that the DFA welcomes initiatives that would restore the funding for the Tier 2 programs and projects of the DFA which were slashed by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM).</p> <p>Under the government's two-tier budget process, ongoing spending is considered in Tier 1, and proposals for new and expanded spending are evaluated in Tier 2.</p> <p>DFA Assistant Secretary Myla Grace Ragenia Macahilig informed the Committee that the programs and projects under DFA's Tier 2 have a total funding requirement of P11.02 billion. This amount will cover printing of e-passports, purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE), conduct of swab testing, and implementation of information and communications technology (ICT) projects, among others.</p> <p>Rep. Rodriguez then asked if the DFA is amenable to a P5-billion additional budget if the whole amount of P11.02 billion cannot be restored. The Foreign Affairs Secretary welcomed the amount which to him will already be of great help to the Department.</p> <p>Reps. Arlene Brosas (Party-List, GABRIELA) and Ferdinand Gaité (Party-List, BAYAN MUNA) inquired about the status of the DFA's repatriation of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), especially seafarers who are stranded on ships abroad.</p> <p>Locsin said that about 178,000 OFWs were already repatriated by the DFA and an estimated 177,000 more are expected to be repatriated in the following months. He assured the Committee that the DFA will exhaust all possible means to bring home the OFWs affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>DFA Undersecretary Sarah Lou Arriola added that on September 28, the Department is scheduled to repatriate Filipino seafarers stranded in China.</p>

<p>Continuation... Appropriations</p>	<p>Rep. Sy Alvarado asked about the status of repatriation of OFWs in Syria. Considering the armed conflict in Syria, Locsin said that flights to this country are not available. Nevertheless, Locsin promised to make representations with the Syrian Embassy in Manila to discuss how best to repatriate OFWs in Syria.</p> <p>Deputy Speaker Luis Raymund "LRay" Villafuerte Jr. (2nd District, Camarines Sur) informed the Committee that under the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act, an amount of P820 million was allocated to DFA to fund its repatriation efforts. Deputy Speaker Villafuerte and Rep. Sy-Alvarado urged the DBM to immediately release the Special Allotment Release Order covering such amount.</p> <p>Deputy Speaker Dan Fernandez (1st District, Laguna) questioned the budget of DFA for the processing of passports when the validity of which has been extended to 10 years already. He said that with the extension, it is expected that the number of people who will renew their passports will be reduced. He suggested that funds should instead be channeled to the salaries and allowances of personnel assigned in the "hardship posts" abroad especially with the current global pandemic.</p> <p>Locsin explained that while there is an expected reduction in the number of applications for the renewal of passports, the number of people applying for new passports is still increasing. He likewise said that the DFA is already reviewing the cost of living allowance for its personnel in Philippine foreign posts and might decide to grant an across-the-board increase in the allowances. Likewise, Locsin said that the staffing pattern in hardship posts will be reviewed. According to Locsin, a hardship post is a diplomatic post where living conditions are difficult.</p> <p>Replying to questions on the deployment ban on nurses and medical workers, Locsin said that President Rodrigo Duterte has eased the ban on deployment of healthcare workers, allowing those who have perfected and signed overseas employment contracts as of August 31, 2020 to leave the country. Initially, the deployment ban only exempted those who have contracts and completed their travel documents on or before March 8, 2020.</p> <p>Catanduanes Rep. Hector Sanchez asked about the effect of the reduction in the budget for consular services. Macahilig replied that it will limit the Department's capacity to undertake consular operations, such as the conduct of mobile passport in cities nationwide. Macahilig requested the reinstatement of the P1.25 billion budget of the DFA in FY 2020 that was realigned to form part of the funds for the government's COVID-19 response, pursuant to DBM National Budget Circular 580 series of 2020.</p> <p>Deputy Speaker Villafuerte also posed questions about the DFA's stand regarding the West Philippine Sea. He asked why diplomatic protests are being filed only against China when in fact there are other countries like Taiwan, Malaysia, and Vietnam that have occupied some parts of the contested area. Locsin answered that while it is true that other countries have their respective claims over the West Philippine Sea, only China has an "active dispute" with the Philippines on the matter.</p>
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