

Meteor shower visible April 22

by **ALCUIN PAPA**
Inquirer.net

SKY watchers are in for a treat when the Lyrids meteor shower, the oldest known meteor shower, becomes visible on April 22, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said last April 8.

Dario dela Cruz, chief of PAGASA's astronomical observation unit, said Lyrids will present up to 15 showers (or streaks) an hour in the eastern sky between midnight of April 22 and dawn of April 23.

"We don't expect any barriers to the observation of the shower, except for cloudiness on the day itself," Dela Cruz said.

The Lyrids meteor shower has been observed for more than 2,600 years and can be seen with the naked eye, according to the website of the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Early Chinese records dating back to 687 BC describe the early showers as "stars falling like rain," NASA said.

But lately, the Lyrids, which start in the area near the constellation Lyra in the night sky,

have been weak, lasting for just less than a day.

According to NASA, meteor showers are dust particles from comets that leave a trail of debris as they pass the sun.

When our planet passes through one of these debris streams, tiny dust particles called meteoroids burn up in the atmosphere, producing a streak of light. All of the well-known annual meteor showers, like the Leonids and Perseids, as well as the Lyrids, are associated with long-lasting comet debris streams that intersect Earth's orbit.

The estimated speed of Lyrid meteoroids is around 109,000 miles per hour or 175,418 kilometers per hour. Their speed produces bright showers which are good for both beginner and expert observers, NASA said. ■

DOLE reports sharp drop in strikes despite mass layoffs

by **MAYEN JAYMALIN**
Philstar.com

EVEN in the wake of mass retrenchments due to the global financial crisis, there were fewer workers opting to go on strike, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) reported.

The DOLE's National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) said there was a sharp decline in the number of striking workers nationwide.

The NCMB recorded a 46 percent drop in the number of notices of strikes in the first two months of the year, compared to the same period in 2008.

A total of 5,296 workers from 37 companies filed notices of strikes from January to February. Compared to the same period last year, the NCMB said a total of 69 notices of strikes were filed, involving 12,667 workers nationwide.

The NCMB reported that 31 of the 37 notices of strikes have already been settled. Majority of the labor disputes were settled amicably.

The NCMB report also showed that only one of the total notices of strike turned into an actual strike, which affected the employment of 700 workers.

In the first two months of 2008, NCMB posted two actual strikes,

involving 569 workers.

The NCMB data, however, indicated growth in the number of preventive mediation from 33 last year to 50 this year.

The number of affected workers, however, dropped from 25,381 to a total of 16,964.

Labor Secretary Mariano Roque has urged disputing labor and management to thresh out their differences through dialogues and collaborative undertakings to cushion the impact of the current financial crisis particularly at the plant level.

Despite the prevailing global economic crisis, employment prospects remain bright in Mindanao, Roque said.

Roque said thousands of jobs are available in five regions in Mindanao.

"While industries in other regions have been severely affected by the global crisis, companies in Mindanao are now rehiring and recalling workers back to regular work," he said.

Roque said job opportunities are available in agricultural sector, mining, and business outsourcing sectors in Western Mindanao, Northern Mindanao, Central Mindanao and CARAGA regions.

He added that agri-business and food processing companies in Mindanao are also hiring crop

technicians, chemists, agriculturists, and managers.

According to Roque, agriculture and plantation-related jobs, particularly those involving pest and disease control in banana, abaca and coconut industries are in demand in Mindanao.

"The continuing demand for skilled workers in plantation and agriculture industries indicate these sector are resilient to the effects of the global economic crisis," he said.

Roque said mining companies in Mindanao have also beefed up their processing operations to sustain employment for mining engineers, geodetic engineers, geologists and heavy equipment operators.

"Business Process Outsourcing companies in Mindanao have also shown buoyancy and are expected to hire more agents, back office workers animators and medical, legal and entertainment transcriptionists," he said.

Various government agencies, including the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have also offered jobs under the emergency employment program to absorb laid off overseas workers.

The militant Migrante International, however, urged the AFP against employing laid off overseas workers on fears that they might end up "militarized." ■



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BFAD: Ban covers only pistachios from US

by **DONA PAZZIBUGAN**
Inquirer.net

NOT all pistachio nuts and products containing pistachio are being recalled from stores and supermarkets, the head of the Bureau of Food and Drugs (BFAD) has clarified.

BFAD Director Leticia Gutierrez said they have so far only banned pistachios imported from the United States, specifically those from the California-based company Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella Inc., whose pistachios were found to have been contaminated with Salmonella.

According to Gutierrez, other pistachio and products with pistachio like ice cream that are available locally could have sourced their pistachios from Spain, Switzerland or even Thailand. The BFAD said the pistachio products imported from countries other than the US have yet to be tested for Salmonella contamination.

The agency warned consumers to "postpone eating other pistachio-containing products until information becomes available about whether the products may be affected."

"For the sake of public safety, we advise the pub-

lic to avoid any pistachio products in general. Just like in the US, it's a blanket instruction," Gutierrez said.

"We're still getting samples of these (other pistachio products) and checking them in our own laboratories," she added.

With less than 300 personnel, the food safety regulatory agency does not have the manpower to scour all the markets nationwide to collect samples of available pistachio products and then test them immediately for Salmonella.

This is why, said Gutierrez, they have directed their recall order to all registered pistachio importers, who have been asked to report if they have sourced their pistachios from Setton and to inform their distributors to take their products off the store shelves.

"Our recall order is directed at importers who got their pistachios from Setton. Since the importers know where they have sold the pistachios, they should tell these distributors to recall their products," Gutierrez said. ■

Cultivate soft skills, not just English

by **ABIGAIL L. HO**
Inquirer.net

EMployees in the business process outsourcing sector, or those who want to enter the industry, should go beyond just speaking good English and concentrate on developing "soft skills."

Justin Myers, general manager of ePerformax's Global Communications and Management Academy, said moving up the ladder in the BPO world today required more than just English skills.

"All the soft skills, they have to have that: empathy, cultural knowledge, listening, critical thinking and analysis. They also have to know their tools," Myers said in an interview.

He said being a BPO employee required a mix of intelligence and emotional quotients.

"They have to have brain power, of course. At the same time, they have to think like an American because those are the people they will be talking to. They have to know how to deal with a different culture," he explained.

ePerformax general manager Carlo Severino explained that, at the onset, it was a person's English-language skills that mattered.

However, as the industry grew, would-be BPO

practitioners had to bring other skills to the table.

"At the onset, English was a critical concern. It was the minimum requirement. As we've grown and taken more sophisticated functions, there was a need to go beyond English," he said.

"But the focus on English supports the thinking that we have to develop other skills as well. If their English is good, then we can train them and focus on other things," he said.

Right skills

The Business Processing Association of the Philippines has lined up various projects that would equip current and potential BPO practitioners with the right skills to get the job, stay in the job and even secure higher positions in the industry.

Among these programs and activities are the planned National Competency Assessment Tool, more English-proficiency training and leadership training for middle managers.

BPAP had also received the first tranche of the P350-million fund for the Pangulong Gloria Scholarship Program, which aims to equip 60,000 individuals with the right skills to work in the growing BPO industry. ■

PGMA's economic team sees need to adjust economic forecast

TO be more factual in its economic forecast, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's economic team sees the need to adjust some items set forth in its economic goals and targets in managing the country's finances.

In a press briefing, both Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita and Presidential Spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said they see nothing wrong in being factual and realistic about the goals and targets in the government's economic projections and neither would it (review) "send the wrong signals to the foreign community."

"Our economic team is continuously evaluating our economic performance and therefore they want to be true to their evaluations so that targets being set by them are realistic especially now that we have a global financial crisis," Ermita told reporters.

Fajardo said the economy is never static and entails many variables. "We will only be adjusting

one or two items. Our assumptions and projections must remain as realistic as possible."

Ermita said the economic managers—officials from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, Department of Finance, the National Economic and Development Authority, the Departments of Trade and Industry and Budget and Management—"have to review the figures so I think that should not be taken as something alarming."

"We are just being realistic and *alam naman niyo siguro na maipagmamalaki natin na* our Finance Secretary Gary Teves is known as the "Best Finance Man of Asia," and if only for that at least gusto natin sa puntong yan na let us be realistic with our goal setting at ng ating financial management," Ermita said.

On President Arroyo's desire for a balanced budget, Ermita said "Of course that is the objective of the national administrator so we can overcome our deficit *dahil kung tayu ay walang deficit*

e baka magamit natin and pondo sa mahahalagang proyekto na ikabubuti ng ating mga kabababayan so that's the goal of all presidents."

On a proposed legislation pushing for 10 percent ad valorem tax on sodas to raise revenue for the annual revenue target, Ermita said "I have to find out from our economic team what this initiative is all about. This is the first time I am hearing this. Let us see what this ad valorem tax is all about, how they intend to go with that and of course definitely they must have legislation in both houses of Congress to find out whether that could be feasible and advisable."

"As they say, the only thing inevitable in life are taxes anywhere in the world. But when the President pushed for the expanded value added tax (EVAT), everybody thought it was a very unpopular move and yet the effective implementation of the EVAT somehow helped our economy," Ermita stressed. ■