

RP gov't expands cash transfer program for poor

by NIKKO DIZON
Inquirer.net

MORE poor families stand will receive cash dole outs from government after the opening of classes as the Department of Social Welfare and Development announced on Friday, May 29 that it expanded its conditional cash transfer program.

"The beneficiaries from the expansion areas shall start getting their grants this coming June," Social Welfare Secretary Esperanza Cabral said in a statement.

The DSWD statement added President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was expected to witness the signing of the memorandum of

agreement for the inclusion of 22 municipalities and two cities in Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga del Norte in the cash transfer program dubbed Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps).

On Thursday, May 28 Cabral and local chief executives of 68 other municipalities nationwide signed a similar agreement including them in the program expansion areas.

The 4Ps is a poverty reduction strategy of the government launched last year aimed at investing in human capital by encouraging extremely poor families to keep their children in school and bringing them to health centers regularly in exchange for a monthly allowance.

Qualified families will receive as much as P1,400 a month if they

meet the conditions set by the DSWD, such as keeping their children aged three to five years old in day care or pre-school classes at least 85 percent of the time and for pregnant mothers, seeking pre- and post- natal care.

The DSWD said that to date, more than P1.6 billion in cash grants has been distributed to 368,000 households in 239 municipalities and 43 provinces.

Cabral said Arroyo has approved a P10-billion budget for the program's implementation this year.

The identification of the rest of the projected 700,000 households in the expansion areas shall be completed by the end of this month, the DSWD said. ■

Comelec continues tests on poll machine

by ANNA VALMERO
Inquirer.net

THE Commission on Elections (Comelec) continued its technical evaluation on the poll machines of lone qualifying bidder Smartmatic-Total Information Management Friday, May 29.

Officials said the bidder has so far passed 24 out of 26 technical criteria, including the critical accuracy rating of 99.9995 percent required in reading ballot marks, Special Bids and Awards Committee (SBAC) chairman Ferdinand Rafanan said.

This was despite snags encountered by the bidder Thursday, May 28 when one of its machines experienced a short-circuit during a demonstration.

"The poll machines of Smartmatic-TIM (Total Information Management) passed the ac-

curacy having read 100 percent of all 20,000 ballot shade marks in the 625 ballots with 32 vote marks each. It passed our minimum requirement of 99.9995 percent accuracy; it did not miss one mark," the poll executive said.

"Except two remaining technical criteria, all the 24 technical criteria for poll machine operation have been successfully hurdled by the PCOS machines tested," he added.

The poll machines, dubbed precinct count optical scans

(PCOS), use special paper ballots marked by voters. These ballots are scanned and counted by these machines, as the ballots are fed into the units. The machine also consolidates all votes.

The bidder's machine has to go through two remaining tests. It must be able to operate for 12 hours continuously using a battery or related power sources. It must also be able to store front and back images of 1,000 test ballots as additional paper trail or second copy of the paper ballots.

Makati representative and co-chairman of the joint congressional oversight committee Teodoro Locsin joined the technical evaluation on Friday, May 29 observing the conduct of the final stages of the bidding process.

"The crucial points of automated elections are: solidity of machine, new ballot boxes to fit the system and capability of bidder

to manufacturer all 80,000 machines. I was told the machines smoked due to short circuit but was able to function. Turns out the smoking helped in the testing also and we need machines that are intelligent. As for manufacturing the machines, Smartmatic said they are confident they can manufacture the machines in five months, we'll see but so far I am satisfied," said Locsin.

The accuracy testing was conducted again on Friday, May 29 to test the accuracy of the machines.

To bag the P11.2 billion poll automation contract, the Smartmatic consortium must pass both technical evaluation and post qualification or verification of its eligibility documents submitted along with its bid proposal, said Rafanan.

The Comelec hopes to award the contract by June. ■

GMA sustains drive for domestic tourism

ROXAS CITY—President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is firming up her commitment to promote domestic tourism by pitching in for known tourist drawers and pushing support infrastructure projects.

As of the latest, President Arroyo was in Zamboanga City, May 29 to lead the inauguration of the biggest theme park in the Visayas and Mindanao—Gloria's Fantasyland.

The Chief Executive, together with Gloria's Fantasyland owner—former Rep. Romeo Jalosjos of the first district of Zamboanga del Norte, and other local officials—cut the ceremonial ribbon to signal the opening of the five-hectare

theme park, in time for the start of the Hudyaka Zanorte Festival, Zamboanga del Norte province's grand festivities hosted by this city.

The President has done similar activities—inauguration, promotion, endorsement or just simple visits to show support to local tourism programs—for other tourist attractions in the country especially in the Central Philippines Super Region, the country's designated tourism belt.

Central Philippines boasts of the world-famous Boracay Island in Malay, Aklan and major tourist destinations, festivals and other tourist come-ons in Palawan, Bicol, Central Visayas and other parts of

the super region.

Over 6 million tourists have visited the region since 2004, a major contribution to the country's push for tourism as an important sector of the economy. The push also includes the construction of millions pesos worth of support infrastructures such as ports and roads.

In Central Philippines, Capiz wants to become an eco-cultural tourism hub, its own contribution to the overall tourism program. Gov. Victor Tanco has been awarded recently by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) for promoting culture tourism anchored on the province's rich cultural heritage of its indigenous people's community. ■

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