DOJ on Pacquiao claim: No stink raised yet vs DOH
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Sen. Manny Pacquiao may have flagged the pandemic spending of the Department of Health (DOH) as questionable, but Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra said on Wednesday that the anticorruption body formed by President Duterte had yet to receive any complaint against the DOH.

Guevarra said the Task Force Against Corruption already requested the Office of the Ombudsman to look into the possible liabilities of public officials behind the mostly infrastructure projects that allegedly involved graft.

He said the multiagency panel led by the Department of Justice (DOJ) presented to Mr. Duterte its midyear report on June 9, which included information on the 210 complaints that had received since its inception last year.

"Except for complaints relating to the [vaccine] Dengvaxia and [Philippine Health Insurance Corp.], the [task force] has not received so far any other complaints against the DOH, particularly in connection with COVID-19 pandemic expenditures," Guevarra told reporters.

Responding on Tuesday to Mr. Duterte’s challenge that he name the government agencies supposedly embroiled in corruption or be shown up as a liar, Pacquiao said they could begin with the DOH and "scrutinize" the rapid test kits, personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks that it had purchased.

The worsening rift between the erstwhile allies Mr. Duterte and Pacquiao, chair and acting president of the ruling PDP-Laban, respectively, is seen as an imminent threat to party unity. It was the first time Pacquiao responded to the President’s comments against him.

In a statement emailed on Wednesday, the activist farmer’s group Kilusang Magbubulakan ng Bayan (KMP) expressed support for Pacquiao’s "battle against corruption," which it said, "will be worth our cheers."

**Complaints acted upon**

Meanwhile, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said the DOH was prepared to open its books to lawmakers, adding that the corruption allegations against it were "baseless."

"The DOH has always been transparent with regard to our fund utilization," Duque said in a statement.

Mr. Duterte assailed Pacquiao on Monday for supposedly saying that his administration was "three times more corrupt" than its predecessor.

But according to Guevarra, about 150 of the complaints received "had been acted upon quietly by the task force."

He said the task force had "endorsed at least 15 cases to the Ombudsman for further investigation after a thorough evaluation," and forwarded to the National Bureau of Investigation the reports of 15 other cases for "case buildup and possible criminal investigation."

The rest were referred to other pertinent government agencies for the conduct of administrative investigation," the justice secretary said.

He said most of the complaints involved projects undertaken by local government units and the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH).

Guevarra said there were also corruption allegations against officials of the Land Registration Authority, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Bureau of Customs, and government-owned and -controlled corporations.

"Disheartened"

Duque admitted being "disheartened by these baseless accusations from our government officials."

Still, he said, he would submit to "inquiries from legislators as this is a part of the checks and balances in our government."

He declared: "I have always been a champion of good governance."

Duque said the DOH was ready to show the paperwork on vaccine-related loans that were "rationalized by the Department of Finance during the Senate committee of the whole hearing," and that "went directly from the funding agency to the vaccine manufacturer."

"It didn’t pass through the DOH or the national government," he said.

To Pacquiao’s question of whether he was ready to show his spending, Duque said the DOH was "more than ready," adding that it submitted reports to concerned government agencies, and even the Senate.

"Politics only"

In Sta. Rosa, Laguna, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said Pacquiao’s accusations of corruption against the DOH was only borne out of politics and the 2022 national elections.

Pacquiao is rumored to be planning a presidential run next year.

"Perhaps Senator Pacquiao was absent when the Cabinet secretaries made their presentations to the Senate. Or if he wasn’t, he may have been preoccupied with something else," Roque said at a briefing during the vaccination of 600 factory workers.

Duque was referring to a Senate hearing on June 15 when senators questioned "vaccine czar" Carlito Galvez Jr. and Budget Secretary Wendel Avisado on the government’s vaccine acquisition and its seeming "preference" for the Chinese brand Sinovac.

Also at the briefing, National Task Force on COVID-19 deputy chief Vince Dizon said the DOH had submitted all documents detailing the expenses for test kits and PPE to the Senate.

"From the very beginning, the government has been very transparent about the pandemic response. Transparency will always be the foundation of this administration,” Dizon said.

But the KMP called on Pacquiao to also look into the DPWH, Department of Agriculture, National Irrigation Administration, and other agencies “that are prone to and notorious for corruption.”

The farmers’ group also urged Pacquiao to go all in in challenging corruption and injustice.

In particular, it asked him to back demands for the P10,000 cash aid, P15,000 agricultural production subsidy, and aid for health workers. "Billions of public funds that should be intended for economic aid or "ayuda" go into the pockets of the few because of chronic corruption," the KMP said. —WITH A REPORT FROM DELFIN T. MALLARI JR.