



# COA: No overpricing in Pharmally mask deal

By **DELON PORCALLA**

Contrary to opposition senators' claims, there was no overpricing in the Department of Budget and Management (DBM)'s procurement of face masks at the height of the pandemic in 2020, the chairman of the Commission on Audit (COA) declared yesterday.

"There is nowhere in the COA report on DBM that there was overpricing. There's no statement to that effect, the observations were related more to inventory management than overpricing," COA Chairman Michael Aguinaldo said during the hearing of the House committee on good government.

"So, it's not right to say that COA discovered there was an overprice, because we never said so in the same report," Aguinaldo, a lawyer by profession, told the committee chaired by Rep. Michael Edgar Aglipay of Diwa party-list.

The COA chief was referring to the procurement of medical paraphernalia like PPEs (personal protective equipment) by the Procurement Service of the DBM (PS-DBM), which was made upon the request of the Department of Health (DOH).

Aguinaldo also said that President Duterte was allowed under the circumstances – there being a health emergency crisis – to do away with biddings as expressly provided under Bayanihan 1.

"The President is allowed to order procurement expeditiously. While the government could have done away with that, there has been an effort to put order in the process, by applying rules under the GPPB requirement," Aguinaldo explained.

GPPB stands for Government Procurement Policy Board, as mandated under Republic Act 9184.

When asked if the PS-DBM's deal with Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corp. was legal, Aguinaldo replied: "As long as it is compliant with GPPB resolution, then it is compliant."

Agreeing with the COA chief's position, Rep. Alfredo Garbin Jr. of Ako Bicol said: "Basically, the Bayanihan 1 allows the President to simply look to the supplier, pay and get the receipt."

At the same hearing, former PS-DBM director and now Overall Deputy Ombudsman Warren Lex Liong said the multibillion-peso contracts with Pharmally Pharmaceuti-

cal that they approved were all aboveboard.

## Liong absolves Go

Liong also denied allegations that the PS-DBM was instructed by Sen. Bong Go or any Palace official to award to Pharmally the contract amounting to P8.68 billion for the supply of face masks, face shields, test kits and PPEs.

"No, Mr. Chair. Nobody instructed us," he told the panel.

He stressed that while he knew Go way back when he was legal consultant of Duterte as then vice mayor of Davao City, he was "never under him (Go)."

During questioning by Deputy Speaker Rodante Marcoleta, Liong said he attended the hearings of the Senate Blue Ribbon committee on the controversy, but was not given an opportunity to speak and answer the allegations.

"You were in the eye of the storm in their hearing, but they did not even ask you? You were not given a chance to explain the way you are explaining here before us now?" Marcoleta asked, to which Liong replied: "On my part, this is the first time given to me to clarify the questions."

Liong said the senators

preferred to question other resource persons during the hearings.

Meanwhile, House justice committee vice chairman Fidel Nograles called for the filing of strong cases over the alleged overpriced procurement of medical supplies by the DOH.

"We are talking about precious government funds here. The sooner that we are able to categorically pinpoint wrongdoing and identify those that are directly involved, we should wrap up our investigation, file the necessary cases and allow the wheels of justice to take its course," said Nograles, who represents the second district of Rizal.

## 9 in ILBO

In a related development, the Bureau of Immigration (BI) placed former presidential adviser on economic affairs Michael Yang and eight others under the Immigration Lookout Bulletin Order (ILBO) to prevent them from leaving the country while being investigated by Congress.

BI Commissioner Jaime Morente said the ILBO was issued following an order from the Department of Justice (DOJ) as requested by the chair of the

Senate Blue Ribbon committee, Sen. Richard Gordon.

"This matter is of national interest. We have made the proper arrangements, and our immigration officers are now on the lookout for the possible departure of the suspect personalities," Morente said.

Also on the ILBO are Liong, former chief of the PS-DBM Lloyd Christopher Lao and Pharmally executives Twinkle Dargani, Huang Tzu Yen, Krizle Grace Mago, Justine Garado, Linconn Ong and Mohit Dargani.

## PDEA, 'Bato' clear Yang

Yesterday at the Senate, Sen. Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa revealed that Duterte – during his term as mayor of Davao – had ordered him to check if Yang had any link to illegal drug operations and that he did not find any.

During the Senate hearing on the budget of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), Dela Rosa sought to verify with the agency whether or not Yang was really linked to illegal drugs as alleged by dismissed police officer Eduardo Acierito, who is now in hiding.

"I don't need to clear any-

body here. I just want to set the record straight," said the senator as he posed his question to PDEA director general Wilkins Villanueva, who said he was unaware of Acierito's current whereabouts and could not substantiate his claims of Yang's links to a drug laboratory in 2005.

## Constitutional crisis

Meanwhile, Sen. Leila de Lima urged the President to refrain from making statements intended to diminish the respect due to the Senate or any of its members.

De Lima filed proposed Senate Resolution No. 898 expressing the sense of the Senate that the President should show courtesy to a co-equal institution following Duterte's recent verbal attacks against senators and the institution.

"Any public attempt at discrediting the Senate and preventing the same and any of its committees from performing its mandate could result in a constitutional crisis which serves to weaken our republic to the detriment of our people," she added.

– With Edu Punay, Rudy Santos, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Robertzon Ramirez, Alexis Romero