



REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES
Senate
Pasay City

Journal

SESSION NO. 10
Monday, August 15, 2022

NINETEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST REGULAR SESSION

Prepared by the
LEGISLATIVE JOURNAL SERVICE
Senate of the Philippines

SESSION NO. 10
Monday, August 15, 2022

CALL TO ORDER

At 3:00 p.m., the Senate President, Hon. Juan Miguel F. Zubiri, called the session to order.

PRAYER

Sen. Christopher Lawrence T. Go led the prayer, to wit:

Almighty God, we praise You and take this moment to reflect on Your mercy and providence as we begin another session.

Lord, we seek Your guidance and gift of wisdom in crafting policies and making enlightened decisions that will propel the future of our nation toward the right direction.

Sana po ay patuloy Ninyo kaming gabayan at maging konsensya namin upang ang ano mang gagawin namin ay tama at para sa kabutihan ng kapwa naming Pilipino at mahal naming bayang Pilipinas.

Please bless us with the genuine desire to fulfill the mandate and obligation entrusted to us by our *kababayans* with the highest moral standards, integrity and fairness.

Finally, may You continue to grant our country unity, peace, and prosperity as we endeavor to glorify Your Name in everything that we do.

Daghang salamat sa Imo, Ginoo, sa among kinabuhi ug sa Imong padayon nga gugma, as we pray in Your Name.

Amen.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

Everybody remained standing for the singing of the national anthem.

ROLL CALL

Upon direction of the Senate President, the Secretary of the Senate, Atty. Renato N. Bantug Jr., called the roll, to which the following senators responded:

Angara, S.	Legarda, L.
Binay, M. L. N. S.	Padilla, R. C.
Cayetano, P. S.	Pimentel III, A. K.
Dela Rosa, R. B. M.	Poe, G.
Ejercito, J. V. G.	Revilla, Jr., R. B.
Escudero, F. J. G.*	Tolentino, F. T. N.
Estrada, J. E.	Tulfo, R. T.
Gatchalian, W.	Villanueva, J.
Go, C. L. T.	Villar, C. A.**
Hontiveros, R.	Villar, M. A.
Lapid, M. L. M.	Zubiri, J. M. F.

With 20 senators physically present and two senators virtually present, or a total of 22 senators present, the Chair declared the presence of a quorum.

*Senator Escudero attended the session online because of his exposure to COVID-19.

**Senator Villar (C), who was also COVID-19 positive, appeared online.

Senator Cayetano (A) arrived after the roll call.

Senator Marcos was on sick leave after testing positive for COVID-19.

BIRTHDAY GREETINGS

At the instance of Senator Villanueva, the Members greeted Senator Villar (M) on the occasion of his birth anniversary.

SUSPENSION OF SESSION

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, the session was suspended.

It was 3:05 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF SESSION

At 3:10 p.m., the session was resumed with Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda presiding.

PRIVILEGE SPEECH OF SENATE PRESIDENT ZUBIRI

Availing himself of the privilege hour, Senate President Zubiri gave a speech on the situation of the sugar industry and recent importation of 300,000 metric tons of sugar.

He stated that the plight of the sugar industry is close to his heart because he belongs to the sixth-generation sugar farmers from Kabankalan, Negros Occidental, represented by the Zayco-Rubin clan from the 1930s to 1950s, before moving to Mindanao.

Lamenting the current state of the local sugar industry, he informed the Body that sugar importation affects both farmers and workers across 400,000 hectares of land in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. He stated that sugar

farms can be found not only in Negros Occidental, but also in Davao del Sur, Bukidnon, Cagayan in Northern Luzon, Tarlac, Pampanga, Nueva Ecija, and areas in Cebu, Northern Cebu, and Nasugbu and Balayan in Batangas.

He stated that there are a little less than 100,000 small and marginalized farmers, that the *hacenderos* who are frequently seen on TV being interviewed only comprise about 2% of the total number of sugar farmers in the country while the remaining 98% are small marginalized farmers who are land reform beneficiaries. He informed the Body that 95% of Bukidnon's sugar farmers are agrarian reform farmer-beneficiaries with one or two hectares of land each. In addition to farmers, he stated that there are 800,000 laborers from Negros and Antique who are hired as *tapaseros*, or those who are employed to manually cut the sugar cane, or as *tapas-karga*, or those who cut the sugar cane and load them onto trucks. He said that there are also sugar mill workers, as well as truck drivers, aides, and mechanics, totaling about five million workers who derive income from the sugar industry.

Citing a taxation study which he presented in the previous Congress, he stated that a farmer could earn up to P30,000 per hectare, P2,500 per month, or roughly P82.00 a day. He noted that prices have risen over the last two years, with fertilizer rising from P800 to P2,700, and diesel from P27.00 to P75.00. As a result, he said that trucking fee to the sugar mill has increased.

He informed the Body that the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA), through Sugar Order No. 4, released an import quota of 300,000 metric tons of sugar without authority from the President, who is also the concurrent head of the Department of Agriculture (DA). He averred that the information, which was uploaded to the SRA's website the same day, was immediately discovered by the Office of the President and has since been deleted and condemned by the President. He stressed that Sugar Order No. 4 was reprehensible and must be investigated by the Senate.

He informed the Body that in February 2022, the Regional Trial Courts of Sagay and Himamaylan issued temporary restraining orders (TRO) and separate preliminary injunctions against the SRA's Sugar Order No. 3, for allowing the importation of sugar. He stated that the TRO would remain in effect until the SRA could explain to the courts why sugar imports were necessary. He stated that the SRA pushed through the implementation of Sugar Order No. 3 in July 2022, claiming that warehouses had ran out of sugar and that other industrial users such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi had requested its importation. He said that the local sugar industry objected because the imported sugar was released in the middle of the harvest season. He revealed that the SRA had requested a ruling from the Office of the Government Corporate Counsel (OGCC) stating that the TRO was only applicable to Negros Occidental. However, he stated that many lawyers believed that the TRO should have been issued for the entire country because the court had ordered an explanation on the importation for the entire country. He lamented the fact that the SRA had circumvented the ruling of the courts and was able to import sugar despite court rulings.

Senate President Zubiri noted that figures as of August 12 would show that there was already 200,000 metric tons of sugar importation because of Sugar Order No. 3 which people are unaware of. He continued that as of July 31, 2022, there was 172,000 metric tons of sugar importation in the Philippines and another 27,000 metric tons is on its way.

In actuality, he explained that what was withdrawn out of 172,000 metric tons of sugar is only 45,680 metric tons. He said that there is still 126,336 metric tons in *bodegas* or 40-foot containers all over Metro Manila, and some more in storage areas of other traders which are not yet being released. Relative thereto, he wondered why some raw sugar in storage are not yet out in the market and surmised that an "artificial shortage" is being created to cause increase in the price of sugar for more profit. He feared that the SRA would also want to import and continue importing sugar despite the availability of stocks which are not yet released to the end-users.

He opined that if the SRA truly wants equitable sugar prices for industrial users and retail consumers, they should release the 127,000 metric tons of imported sugar by virtue of the earlier Sugar Order No. 3. For his part, it is still unclear as to why the SRA wants another 300,000 metric tons of sugar importation when in fact, the *bodegas* are still full of sugar.

At this point, Senate President Zubiri narrated that he had briefed Malacañang about the said concern when he had the opportunity to attend the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) oath-taking upon request of the Office of the President. In his short meeting with the President, he shared that he thanked the President for fighting for the farmers by preventing the release of Sugar Order No. 4. He said that the President was even furious when he asked to what extent the government should import sugar if there is truly a need. He said that the President would likewise want to know whether there is assurance that the supply would go directly to the people and whether the consumers would be protected against too much price increase.

He added that he was also able to meet Undersecretary Panganiban, together with Executive Secretary Vic Rodriguez, and that they discussed ways and steps on how to release sugar from *bodegas* in order to stabilize the artificial shortage as reported by SRA.

As to the reason why the SRA insists having an additional 300,000 metric tons of sugar importation, he surmised that importation is a lucrative business, revealing the information he got from an insider that importers in government agencies issuing importation permits receive as an exchange "*tong-pats*" or in common language, "*patong*" or "SOP". He continued that said "SOP" could amount to as low as P50 and as high as P100 per bag. To illustrate how much could be earned from the issuance of importation permits, he stated that 300,000 metric tons or six million bags of sugar would have an equivalent "SOP" of around P300 million at P50 per bag, or P600 million at P100 per bag.

Nonetheless, he said that he salutes Undersecretary Sebastian, who has quite a good reputation from the agriculture industry, for resigning immediately after signing the order in behalf of the President. Thereafter, he presented to the Body the resignation letter of Atty. Rolly Beltran, a member of the board representing the millers. He said that the resignation letter of Attorney Beltran stated that the latter tendered his resignation due to health reasons without prejudice to the would-be investigation in connection with the issuance of Sugar Order No. 4. Further stated in the said letter, he shared, is that Attorney Beltran left the SRA as early as July 1, 2022 upon the expiration of his tour of duty and the issuance of Memorandum Circular No. 1-2022. However on July 29, 2022, Attorney Beltran received an email from SRA management stating that he was on hold-over capacity until a new board is appointed by the President.

He said that Undersecretary Sebastian was in charge of many things in the DA. With the reputation of Undersecretary Sebastian, he believed that the former will not agree to import sugar unless convinced by the SRA Board. He then challenged the SRA, particularly its head to resign immediately just like Undersecretary Sebastian and Attorney Beltran did in order to have an honest-to-goodness investigation regarding the illegal issuance of Sugar Order No. 4.

He expressed disappointment to those who remained in their positions despite the President's order to resign due to many controversies. He hoped that the Blue Ribbon Committee chaired by Senator Tolentino could call for a hearing to address the issue of usurpation of authority and the possible cases of violation of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act for coming up with an order without the approval of the authorized secretary or head of agency.

Noting that sugar farmers only receive P2,500 as income from their marginalized farming, he feared that five million more people would be affected if their industry collapses. Included in those that would be affected, he said, are 90,000 small farmers and 800,000 industry workers, Antiqueños and members of the Island of Panay. Some areas which are at the height of insurgency, he said, are areas of Negros, many areas of Davao del Sur, and Bukidnon in the hinterlands—all of which are planting sugarcanes.

Senate President Zubiri recalled that during the previous campaign, the outcry of their party, the UniTeam, including the President, was to "Buy Filipino products first." He thanked the President for taking steps so the country would not rely solely on importation.

In concluding his privilege speech, he urged the Body to find out the real motive behind Sugar Order No. 4 and again challenged the SRA to explain why there are metric tons of sugar in the *bodegas* which were left to perish due to the delay in their release.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR LEGARDA

Senator Legarda thanked the Senate President for his timely speech on the Sugar Regulatory Administration.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

Senator Villanueva lauded Senate President Zubiri for delivering a very powerful and important speech.

INTERPELLATION OF SENATOR GRACE POE

Preliminary, Senator Poe thanked the Senate President for doing extensive research and for sharing the information he has had from those who came forward to tell him about the possible anomalies on sugar importation. In reply, Senate President Zubiri thanked Senator Poe for her support in his fight, noting that Panay and Iloilo also have vast lands on which sugarcanes are cultivated.

Asked by Senator Poe on the actual mandate and role of the Sugar Regulatory Administration, Senate President Zubiri replied that the SRA was created by an Executive Order or a Presidential decree many years ago. Under the said decree, he said that the SRA has the mandate to classify sugar for importation and exportation, adding that sugar has various classifications, namely A, B, C, D, and E. He explained that sugar under classification A is allocated as assistance to the United States for many decades and with better term of pricing at that time. He added that the Philippines used to allocate 10% of the country's sugar production, but that at present, it is only at five (5%) percent because of the consumption by the domestic market. Meanwhile, he said that sugar under category B is for local consumption, while sugar under category C is used as reserve. He said that the SRA classifies all sugar that is produced in the country by Victorias Milling Company (VMC) and Don Pedro Roxas in Nasugbu, to avoid the oversupply of sugar for a certain time. He stated that SRA is also mandated to give the certification to import if there is a lack of sugar in the country. Further, he said that the mandate of the SRA under the Sugar Industry Development Act (SIDA), which Senators Villar and Ejercito authored, is to guide the industry on where to go such as by crafting a modernization program.

Asked if the SRA is allowed to give grants and support to the farmers to buy equipment among others, and if they have funding for such, Senate President Zubiri answered in the affirmative, stating that it used to have a yearly P2 billion fund for the farmers but this was decreased to P1 billion per year through the years. He further elaborated that 50% of the fund goes to farm-to-market roads, which are identified by the milling districts. He said that it is the SRA that allocates the usage of funds for projects and equipment.

Senator Poe informed the Body that for a time, the SRA had an increase in their budget because of that particular mandate as they have to help the farmers. She also stated that she has spoken to a lot of food manufacturers who said that there is shortage due to unreleased sugar—a statement which Senate President Zubiri confirmed.

Senator Poe mused whether the individuals or companies which were given license to import have already been identified, because the same syndicate might be involved in the matter. In response, Senate President Zubiri stated that the government does not have the capacity to fund and import bags of sugar; since they have licensed importers. Unfortunately, for lack of time, he said that he was not able to secure the list of licensed sugar importers. He then surmised that the Senate could launch an investigation and request the list of accredited sugar importers from the SRA should his privilege speech, the interpellations, and manifestations thereon be referred to the Committee on Accountability of Public Officers & Investigations, chaired by Senator Tolentino. In fact, he disclosed that in his recent meeting in Malacañang, Executive Secretary Rodriguez stated that the latter would launch a crackdown on sugar hoarders. He opined that sugar hoarding is basically tantamount to economic sabotage.

Senator Poe surmised that importers are already asking for another permit to bring in more supplies of sugar when they have been hoarding their existing stocks which would then be sold at a higher price. She also agreed that the committee hearing would be an opportunity for the Senate to identify such unscrupulous individuals and

find proof that they could be hoarding as much as 127,000 metric tons of imported sugar. She said that she would also want to know the identity of the official who signed Sugar Order No. 4.

Senate President Zubiri replied that the four signatories were SRA Administrator Hermenegildo Serafica, planters' representative Aurelio Valderrama Jr., sugar millers' representative Atty. Roland B. Beltran and DA Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian, who—illegally and without authority—supposedly signed on behalf of President Marcos Jr.

Consequently, Senator Poe commended the fast action of the Office of the President in detecting the unauthorized attempt to import 300,000 metric tons of sugar through Sugar Order No. 4. In past situations, she said that there was inaction on the part of the government to avert an impending problem until it is already a full-blown crisis.

She then expressed her support to Senate President Zubiri's call for an investigation on the SRA's supposed approval of the importation of 300,000 metric tons of sugar. She said that the Senate also needs to be enlightened on the plans and programs of the DA and the SRA for the sugar industry, as well as the identity of the culprits of the alleged sugar hoarding.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

Associating himself with the privilege speech of Senate President Zubiri on the problems of the sugar industry, Senator Villanueva made the following manifestation:

I recall when the Department of Agriculture (DA) made a report here in the Senate after *Typhoon Odette* last year, which was really felt by our agricultural sector. In that report, particularly the sugar industry suffered an estimated P1.15 billion in losses because of destroyed sugar canes and damages suffered by sugar milling and refining facilities, based on the data given to us by the DA.

Just to put on record, what the Senate President already mentioned, *iyong* 800,000 workers ng agriculture industry; *iyong* 90,000 *na magsasaka ng tubo*; *at, gusto kong banggitin iyong binanggit kanina*, it is actually almost six million Filipinos who were directly and indirectly affected in the sugar industry.

One last point that I would like to say: there was an article earlier this month in *Business Mirror* which told the story of the 60-year old Medeline Colorado, a street vendor of banana cue. *Ayon po sa kanya, dati iyong banana cue niya ay caramelized. Ngayon daw po ay glazed na lamang. At dati, ang kinikita niya araw-araw ay P870 sa pagtitinda nitong banana cue. Ngayon ay P390 na lamang. Dati, P10 ang benta niya; ngayon, P15.* So, it is just unfortunate *na marinig natin iyong* privilege speech *ng ating* Senate President that against the backdrop of an industry still reeling from the aftermath of the typhoon, decrease in farmers' productivity, and unabated increase in sugar prices, we are faced today with the issue of an alleged illegal and unauthorized importation order from the Sugar Regulatory Administration.

I just hope and pray *na sa imbestigasyon na mangyayari*, which I support, there would be a clear-cut mechanism as to when are we going to import. *Hindi iyong katulad po nito na binabanggit ng ating* Senate President *na napakadami pa ng stock ay mag-i-import na tayo. Sana maging klaro po dito na* before they can act on it *meron tayong klarong mekanismo na nakikita: "Uy, kailangan na nating mag-import."*

With that, I just want to put again, for the *Record*, my sincere support to the privilege speech of our honorable Senate President.

Thank you.

INQUIRY OF SENATOR CAYETANO (P)

Asked by Senator Cayetano (P) on the difference between a caramelized and a glazed banana cue, Senator Villanueva explained that "caramelized" refers to a fried banana that is generously covered with caramel while "glazed" describes a dessert that is covered by a very thin coating of melted or sprinkled sugar.

REMARK OF SENATE PRESIDENT ZUBIRI

At the outset, Senate President Zubiri said that Senator Villanueva is a former chairperson for six years of the Committee on Labor, Employment and Human Resources Development.

Firstly, he said that losses to the sugar industry would mean the displacement of many farm workers who do not own the land but do the planting and ploughing of the fields, as well as the farrow-to-feeder or farrow-to-finish operation, and even sugarcane harvesting and truck loading. He noted that labor reforms have been instituted and that farm workers are now paid the proper daily wage under the regulation of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

Secondly, he opined that even though the Philippines should import sugar, it is not yet the right time to do so. He also believed that the government should determine the sufficient amount of sugar stocks that would be brought into the country in order to avoid overimportation that could kill the local sugar industry. Based on the figures given by the SRA, he said that the country would need only 100,000 metric tons of imported sugar and not 300,000 metric tons. He added that the importation could be distributed to 50,000 metric tons each for the last two quarters of 2022 since the country is already harvesting its own sugar in Negros Island, Bukidnon, and other parts of the country. He said that importation may still be resorted to since the intention is to bring down inflation.

At this point, he disclosed that he had recently met with the President and was helping the latter in his plans to give assistance to the consumers. He said that the Chief Executive is expected to make an announcement on a scheme that would bring down the prices of refined sugar to about 25% of the current price.

Assuring the Body that there is a solution to the sugar industry's woes, he reiterated his suggestion for the government to cut down on sugar importation since it has more than enough supplies in storage. He said that sugar prices would go down once importers start selling their available stock.

INTERPELLATION OF SENATOR PIMENTEL

Asked by Senator Pimentel for details on the SRA, Senate President Zubiri replied that it is led by a Board composed of four personalities, including the DA Secretary—who happens to be the President of the Philippines—as the chairperson, and members consisting of the SRA Administrator as a member, a planters' representative, and a millers' representative.

As to whether the planters' representative could also come from the farmers, Senate President Zubiri replied in the affirmative.

As to whether the planters' representative had ever been one of the farmers, he explained that while it has been the practice of the Sugar Alliance of the Philippines (SAP) to nominate someone who is either a manager of a big farm, a local sugar cooperative or manager of a farmers' federation, it could also be a small farmer who is recommended by the alliance.

At this point, Senator Pimentel wondered if a farm worker has ever represented the planters in the SRA Board considering that legislators should look after the welfare of farmers who earn a meager income of P2,500 a month.

Asked for the composition of the alliance and if it has been monopolizing the seat of the planters' representative in the SRA, Senate President Zubiri replied that it is composed of farm workers, farmers, and millers or the six million Filipinos, who would either be directly or indirectly affected in the sugar industry.

He also pointed out that the sugar industry is one of the most organized agricultural blocks in the country. Unlike the unorganized corn and rice industries, he said that the stakeholders of the sugar industry would unite in bad times or disunite in good times, depending on the situation.



In the past few years, he said that those appointed to positions in the SRA were selected because of their close relationship to certain officials in Malacañang. In the previous administration, he claimed that he and Senator Ejercito had recommended candidates that would best represent the farmers in the industry. However, he said that their endorsements had been rejected since Malacañang accommodated its favored candidates.

He also disclosed that a group of about 20 sugar farmers— from Panay Federation of Sugarcane Farmers, Inc. (PANAYFED); to Luzon Federation of Sugar Producers, Inc. (LUZONFED), composed of the provinces of Batangas, Tarlac, and Pampanga; and to big federations such as the United Sugar Producers Federations of the Philippines, Inc. (UNIFED)—had come up with a shortlist of candidates that would represent them in the SRA. He added that included in the list was the general manager of one of the largest independent sugar farmers association in the Philippines with 80-85% of small farmers as members, which are mostly agrarian reform beneficiaries in Negros Island. He believed that such a person would be able to push for the purposes, needs, and solutions to complaints of small farmers. Senator Pimentel agreed, saying that it is the only seat where the marginalized sugar farmers could be represented.

Senator Pimentel then asked whether the seat for the millers' representative is allotted for businessmen. As a reply, Senate President Zubiri expressed his support if Senator Pimentel wishes to consider amending the SRA Charter to add one seat for the sugar workers and agrarian reform beneficiaries.

Senator Pimentel expressed his intention to study the matter more thoroughly and categorize the sectors dependent on the sugar industry, such that if a particular group is large enough, he would propose to allocate a seat for it in the Board for proper representation. He also underscored the need to balance the interest of the consumers as the price of a kilo of refined sugar at P100 to P110 is almost at the same level as a liter of diesel.

As the SRA has been in existence for more than 30 years, Senator Pimentel surmised that the agency would already have a complete data on the location of sugar warehouses in the country. Senate President Zubiri said that the SRA has a complete list of importers with the addresses of their respective warehouses.

Asked to confirm if the country has an anti-hoarding law, Senate President Zubiri replied that there is Republic Act No. 10845 or An Act Declaring Large-Scale Agricultural Smuggling as Economic Sabotage, Prescribing Penalties Therefor and for Other Purposes.

Senator Pimentel noted that the anti-hoarding law is connected to economic sabotage when there is intentional hoarding of particular agricultural goods and timing their release in the market in order to influence the prices of the goods. He said that such creation of an artificial shortage violates the law.

Stating that the DA is authorized to conduct spot checks on warehouses, Senator Pimentel however surmised that President Marcos, as the concurrent Secretary of Agriculture, might be too busy running the country. He then asked who is the designated point man of the President who would be totally focused on matters concerning the agriculture department. Senate President Zubiri said that Undersecretary Sebastian was supposed to be the Executive Assistant of President Marcos in the DA but it was unfortunate that SO No. 4 happened.

Senator Pimentel recalled that according to Senate President Zubiri, there are still 127,000 metric tons of sugar which came from Sugar Order No. 3. Relative thereto, he asked whether it was prudent to get someone to focus solely on agricultural matters, 100% of the time.

In response, Senate President thanked Senator Pimentel for his concern regarding the issue of imported sugar still stocked in storage warehouses. He disclosed that he has received complaints from industrial users such as Coca Cola, a softdrink company, that they no longer have sugar for their drinks. He said that he has informed the companies about the 127,000 metric tons of sugar in the bonded warehouses that have not been released.

He said that in order to address the concern of the different companies regarding the shortage of sugar, he suggested a systemic change in the style of importation where the companies in need of sugar, like the soft drinks

companies, may directly be given the import permits to allow them to import the volume of sugar that they need for their products. That way, he said that the imported sugar will go straight to the companies which need them and it will eliminate the need for traders or certified importers which get unlawful commissions or *tongpats* from the importation.

Agreeing with Senate President Zubiri's suggestion, Senator Pimentel noted that it would be up to the industrial user to have that option if they prefer but he pointed out that there may be some who would feel that they do not have the competence to do the importation themselves. However, he said that it would be a good idea to have that option.

Asked by Senator Pimentel whether the suggested setup will affect the prices of sugar for the ordinary consumers, Senate President Zubiri replied in the negative, saying that there are enough stock or supply from the local sugar industry for the regular or ordinary consumers.

As regards the annual total normal demand for sugar or the total domestic production of sugar, and whether the domestic producers can satisfy the local market or if there is such a need to import sugar every year, Senate President Zubiri said that domestic production is lumped with industrial users such as soft drink companies, and local users such as banana cue vendors and sellers. He said that domestic consumption average between 2.2 million metric tons to 2.4 million metric ton while production is between 1.8 million metric tons to almost 3 million metric tons. However, he lamented that production is affected by typhoons and on the average, there is a shortage of about 400,000 metric tons a year.

On a related matter, Senator Pimentel asked how many sugar orders have been issued by the board under the SRA. Senate President Zubiri said there have been four sugar orders allowing for the importation of sugar but he does not have information as to the amount of imported sugar on SO No. 1 and SO No. 2. He said that about 200,000 metric tons of sugar has been imported under SO No. 3 before the more recent 300,000 metric tons, thus resulting to a surplus of imported sugar.

Senator Pimentel said that Senate President Zubiri mentioned earlier that there are two 83,000 metric tons of sugar that entered the country and SO No. 4 provided for another order that will go beyond the average of 400,000 metric tons.

He said that Senate President Zubiri made grave allegations against the members of the SRA who signed Special Order No. 4 but he believed that a hearing was needed or justified to allow the lawmakers to understand how the SRA make its decisions and for the people involved in the controversy to defend themselves and explain what prompted them to determine the need to import 300,000 metric tons of sugar.

Senate President Zubiri said that he requested that the people who are involved should immediately resign from the SRA while the investigation is ongoing to avoid any form of shenanigans with the record keeping and documentation that they are trying to collate. He likewise said that *delicadeza* dictates that they resign or at least, take a leave of absence pending investigation.

At this juncture, Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda relinquished the chair to Senator Ejercito.

He said that he also found it surprising that the people allege that their appointments are not coterminous with the previous administration. He said that since there is already a new administration, these people should submit a courtesy resignation especially since some of them have allegedly been embroiled in some controversies in the past.

Senate President Zubiri said that it is very well-documented in the newspapers that some members of the previous board of the SRA have complained regarding the procedures of the SRA leadership in terms of appointing officials and in the manner of utilizing the funds in the SRA but these complaints have fallen in deaf ears.

He admitted that he avoided speaking on the controversies of the past but he have had enough with the issuance

of SO No. 4. He believed that there should be a fresh start in the SRA and that President Marcos should appoint people who are accountable for their actions and are true representatives of the farmers.

Senator Pimentel said that Undersecretary Sebastian and Atty. Rolly Beltran representing the millers have resigned from the SRA. He asked the Senate President to whom his call to resign was addressed to. Senate President Zubiri said that it was directed at the remaining members of the SRA board, namely the administrator and the representative of the farmers. He said that if there is some delicadeza left in the administrator, he should immediately resign from his position or at least take a leave of absence.

Senator Pimentel surmised that based on the letter of Attorney Beltran which was read into the *Record*, Attorney Beltran had left the Board on July 1, 2022 but he was informed later by the Office of the Executive Secretary or an office under the Office of the President that there was an order to stay in holdover capacity. He opined that it could be easier to remove the people who do not wish to resign in the SRA by invoking Memorandum Circular No. 1 or not to apply the holdover capacity to those people.

He said that while it was alright to have President Marcos as the acting secretary of the Department of Agriculture, to stress the important place of agriculture, agricultural matters and food production in his administration, it was more prudent to have a person who could dedicate 100% of his or her time on agricultural matters because the President is also addressing other concerns of the country. He lamented that Undersecretary Sebastian could have misread or misappreciated the extent of the delegation of authority given to him by the Office of the President.

Senate President Zubiri said that Undersecretary Sebastian may have believed that there was indeed a shortage in the supply of sugar and it was necessary to import and he was not informed that there was 127,000 metric tons in storage in the warehouses. He said that these are just some of the issues that could be best addressed during the public hearing on the matter.

Senator Pimentel said that the public hearing would also be a venue and an opportunity for Undersecretary Sebastian to defend the position they took. On a related matter, he said that it appeared that Senate President Zubiri conceded the fact that sugar importation may actually still be necessary but he was concerned about the volume of the importation. He said that SO No. 4 cannot be interpreted to be just a cut on the volume of sugar importation but the SRA could import from one metric ton and all the way up to 300,000 metric tons.

For his part, Senate President Zubiri said that the issue raised by Senator Pimentel pointed to the efficiency of the SRA. He said that there must be a mechanism to determine the need to import and who comes up with the decision to import. He believed that there should be a better mechanism where all stakeholders are consulted, invited and vetted out. He said that the end-users, such as those from the food and beverage industry, as well as the DTI and other stakeholders should be allowed to give their inputs.

He also said that the volume of the imported sugar should not be to the detriment of the farmers and the local sugar industry.

Saying that he would not have delivered a privilege speech had there been real shortage of sugar supply, Senate President Zubiri asserted that the probe on sugar importation must continue and suggested to let the axe fall on whoever would be found guilty. He mused why there was a need for additional 300,000 metric tons of sugar when according to a document from the SRA, there are 127,000 metric tons in the warehouses and another 27,000 metric tons in transit, for a total of 154,000 metric tons of sugar.

In relating that the SRA has been accustomed to huge importations as told by a sugar industry insider, he said that the agency should do away with the practice and instead make the ease of doing business more efficient. For instance, he said that if Pepsi Cola or Coca-Cola needs 50,000 metric tons of sugar, they should just be given import permits and let them find the means to import; and that in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the business owners should simply find an accredited importer and trader whom they would pay so their orders

would be released. He pointed out that if a government agency would import and store sugar for the benefit of a selected few, price manipulation follows.

At this juncture, Senator Pimentel thanked Senate President Zubiri for broaching the issue on hoarding, profiteering and cartels of basic necessities and prime commodities, which is prohibited under Section 5 of Republic Act No. 7581, or the "The Price Act." Thirty years since its passage, he hoped that the warehouses where the imported commodities are placed would be identified with the help of the Department of Agriculture.

To the remark that to date, nobody has been convicted of hoarding, or the undue accumulation of any basic commodity beyond normal inventory levels, Senate President Zubiri added that the importers could still be identified from the sugar importation orders and permit applications which they signed. He assured that at the proper time, he would ask for the names of the importers from the SRA.

Asked how many entities were given permits to import sugar, Senate President Zubiri replied that there were 28 entities, and that 45,680 metric tons of sugar were withdrawn, leaving a balance import of 126,336 metric tons.

Citing that the sugar shortage was allegedly artificial, Senator Pimentel suggested giving the DA authority to enforce the provisions of the Price Act and other laws, and check the warehouses for possible hoarding and illegal profiteering. Noting that the privilege speech would be referred to the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee, he proposed that the committee should invite both the DA and the SRA to ascertain their connection; to ask for a list of those who were granted special trading position to import sugar; and to identify the personalities behind the corporate names as well as those who gained beneficial interest from the transaction. Senate President Zubiri concurred.

Senator Pimentel also appealed to the chairperson of the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee to immediately act on the matter because the increasing retail price of sugar at P100 to P115 per kilo would terribly affect the consumers.

INTERPELLATION OF SENATOR CAYETANO (P)

At the outset, Senator Cayetano (P) commended Senate President Zubiri for bringing the matter to the fore so the Senate could get to the bottom of the sugar import controversy.

In acknowledging that Senate President Zubiri was very much involved in anything farming-related as he studied Masters in Environment and Natural Resources Management (Upland Resources Management), Senator Cayetano (P) remembered that similar issues on artificial shortages, supply, demand, and hoarding of important commodities like vegetables and meat occurred in the previous years.

Senate President Zubiri mentioned about a Facebook post regarding the viral dumping of overripe tomatoes by Bukidnon farmers after a price dip; the farmers could not sell their produce in Cagayan de Oro due to the low price of imported tomatoes. Now, unscrupulous individuals were again able to take advantage of another product, to the detriment of the consumers, he said.

To Senator (P) Cayetano's suggestion to also refer Senate President Zubiri's privilege speech to the Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform as she also wanted to see an overview of agricultural products and help prevent a situation where another commodity would again be hoarded, Senate President Zubiri agreed that his speech could be secondarily referred to the committee.

For her part, Senator Cayetano (P) reasoned that the Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform has had similar hearings in the past; in fact, food security is also the concern of the Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking. She then hoped that the next DA Secretary would present food supply projections and make information known to the public, just like how the weather is predicted and the percentage of damaged crops are assessed.

As an aside, Senate President Zubiri stated that farmers are very religious—they always pray for fair weather and clear skies, especially during planting and harvesting season. He said that the agricultural industry is a difficult industry to be in because crops are affected by acts of God, the reason why it was made as science thereby teaching the farmers how to control pests, how to produce seeds that are drought- or flood-resistant, and how to perform plant genetic modification and produce genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

He noted that a major problem affecting agriculture is climate change; so, whenever a typhoon hits a sugar plantation, the sugarcane which is a type of grass, does not die but its sugar efficiency and quality is reduced because it absorbs more water. Thus, in case a one-hectare land was supposed to produce 100 bags of sugar, only 70 bags would be harvested because of the typhoon—little intricacies that make agriculture a very hard industry.

In view of the challenges faced by the agricultural sector, he noted that the governments of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand provide subsidies and preferential treatment to the farmers by buying their products for feeding programs.

As he commended President Marcos' move to take charge of the Agriculture department in the meantime rather than appointing someone to the post, he recalled that during the election campaign, he advised the President to appoint not just a politician but an agriculturist or a technocrat from U.P. Los Banos (UPLB) or the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

With the country having programs and facilities like IRRI, which could produce the best kind of rice, having been funded by Bill Gates and the United Nations, Senate President Zubiri lamented that there is still not enough rice production for the Filipinos. Furthermore, he believed that what prompted President Marcos to take on the DA portfolio was the food crisis and rising food cost so he could push a good agricultural program for the country.

On sugarcane which loses its sugar efficiency whenever it gets wet, Senator Cayetano underscored that sugar does not have any health benefits, and has no nutritional value even if it has calories.

Senator Cayetano (P) noted that in addition to sugar from sugarcane, other sweeteners such as stevia and honey are also sold in the market as sugar substitutes. Some scientists, she said, considered these sweeteners as healthier alternatives to sugar, while other scientists and advocates maintain that anything sweet, even organic honey, is still not good for the body. She also shared her observation that some food packages with nutrition claims, like "sweetened with natural sugarcane," are misleading, since almost all types of sugar are from sugarcane. Nonetheless, she asked whether it is possible to have a separate market for the sugarcane that has been laid flat to the ground by storms, noting that they have lesser sugar content and thus are perceived to be healthier than the ones that have not.

In response, Senate President Zubiri stated that high-fructose corn syrup is the worst sweetener because it causes cancer and is derived from genetically-modified planted corn, the long-term effects of which on health are still unknown. He believed that sugarcane sugar is still a healthier option than high-fructose corn syrup which is one of the leading causes of obesity in the U.S. where it is widely used as a sweetener. In contrast to the rest of the country, he stated that the U.S. has very limited source of sugarcane in South Florida, which is why they rely on high-fructose corn syrup to sweeten their food and beverages.

Senator Cayetano (P) thanked the Senate President for educating the Body that sugar from sugarcane is still somehow a healthier option. She explained that she was only bringing up the possibility of looking for a market for sugarcane that are prostrated by storms so that they would not be put to waste, citing relevant sustainable development goals pursued by the government, such as SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). She stated that the sugar industry provides decent work for the country's farmers and that sugar is a product that many people can enjoy and consume in moderation.

Before considering supplementing the country's sugar supply, she emphasized the importance of ensuring self-sufficiency, supply sustainability, and price stability in the sugar industry for the country and its farmers.

For her final point, she cited Section 3 of Republic Act No. 10845, or the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016, to wit: "Large-Scale Agricultural Smuggling as Economic Sabotage. The crime of large-scale agricultural smuggling as economic sabotage, involving sugar, corn, pork, poultry, garlic, onion, carrots, fish, and cruciferous vegetables, in its raw state, or which have undergone the simple processes of preparation or preservation for the market, with a minimum amount of one million pesos (P1,000,000.00), or rice, with a minimum amount of ten million pesos (P10,000,000.00), as valued by the Bureau of Customs (BOC), is committed...." Relative thereto, she disclosed that in her conversation on the matter with her seatmates, she left the decision to Senators Dela Rosa and Padilla as to what penalty should be imposed on those found guilty of large-scale agriculture smuggling as long as these individuals are punished. Concerning the current issue, she recalled that Senate President Zubiri mentioned that two officials had already resigned as a result of their involvement. However, she believed that the law should be strictly enforced in order to better protect all farmers and their products from smugglers.

Senator Villanueva interjected at this point, stating that stevia is a natural sweetener derived from the stevia plant, and stated that his hometown, Bocaue, which is presently celebrating its 444th founding anniversary, is the largest producer of stevia in the country.

INTERPELLATION OF SENATOR HONTIVEROS

Senator Hontiveros stated at the outset that she was watching with great interest at the recent issuance of SO No. 4, surmising that there are mixed signals in the decision-making between the Department of Agriculture and Malacañang, and wondered whether former Usec Leocadio S. Sebastian had issued the order with approval.

Because people's reputations are at stake, Senate President Zubiri expressed regret that he will not speculate, but suggested that the former undersecretary be asked directly, at the appropriate time, what motivated him to sign the order on behalf of the President. He also expressed interest in knowing whether the former undersecretary was informed of a sugar shortage by the industry or was given an order, which was why he signed it. Nonetheless, he believes Malacañang is conducting a parallel investigation into the matter.

In response to Senate President Zubiri's statement that reputations are at stake, Senator Hontiveros stated that according to news reports, former Undersecretary Sebastian is a career official with extensive experience in the Department of Agriculture and, as such, would not act without a clear directive. Senate President Zubiri responded that if someone gave the former undersecretary the go-ahead, he is confident that it was not the President, as the latter was the first one who became enraged and ordered the suspension of SO No. 4.

At this juncture, Senator Ejercito relinquished the Chair to Senator Villanueva.

Continuing her interpellation, Senator Hontiveros asked Senate President Zubiri which theory he thinks is more plausible: that former Undersecretary Sebastian is given authority to issue the importation order by the Executive Secretary, or that it is simply an importation plan as explained by the PCOO. Senate President Zubiri again expressed regret that he will not make a guess as to which theory is more plausible, but assured that the Executive Secretary did not authorize the order's issuance, revealing that they suspected that what happened was possibly a demolition job. He added that according to the Executive Secretary, it was him who took the matter to the President, who then instructed the cancellation of the order.

When asked if there is a true shortage of raw sugar, particularly from domestic sources, Senate President Zubiri explained that in some areas, such as Bukidnon, there is no milling for about two to three months—typically from June to August or September—and that it begins after the rainy season. Fortunately, he stated that the lean season had just ended, and that the harvest had begun two to three weeks ago. In fact, he stated that several mills are already in operation and producing sugar on top of the 127,000 metric tons of imported refined sugar to be supplied to the country's industrial sector.

Asked whether there is enough domestically-produced raw sugar in storage in addition to the 127,000 metric tons imported refined sugar mentioned to safely conclude that there is no shortage, Senate President Zubiri replied



in the affirmative, saying that there is an estimated 55,000 metric tons of raw sugar produced domestically from the mills of Batangas, Bukidnon, and Negros, among other areas.

Senator Hontiveros asked whether the country would still need to import 300,000 metric tons of sugar to cover its consumption for the year, despite the fact that an additional 27,000 metric tons of sugar was on its way, for a total of 154,000 metric tons of sugar in storage. In response, Senate President Zubiri stated that the country may still need to import not more than 100,000 metric tons of sugar as the year approaches the Christmas season when sugar consumption is expected to increase, and as lockdowns are lifted and malls and restaurants reopen.

She then recalled that both the Senate President and the Minority Leader mentioned the small sugar farmers sector, which is made up of about 82,000 sugarcane growers with farms of five hectares or less. She recalled that Senate President Zubiri stated that, in 2019, of the 82,000 sugarcane growers, there were 78,276 agrarian reform beneficiaries, or ARBs.

Saying that the voice of the small sugar farmers are being drowned out by the issue, Senator Hontiveros asked for the quantifiable impacts of excessive sugar importation to the small sugar farmers. Senate President Zubiri responded that an oversupply of sugar will cause sugar prices to fall, to the detriment of farmers, citing factors affecting sugarcane cultivation and sugar production such as the increase in cost of urea fertilizer from P800 to P2,700; the increase of fuel prices, particularly diesel, from P25 to P75 per liter only two years later, which is commonly used for tractors and trucks for sugarcane hauling; and charges for truck rentals for small farmers with one to two hectares of farm, which is usually computed as a percentage of the gross income, among other expenses. He stated that his goal is to find a sweet spot wherein the price of sugar would be high enough to encourage the farmers and low enough for consumers to afford.

While farmers provide food for the country, Senator Hontiveros expressed regret that many small farmers, ironically, belong to a sector at risk of food insecurity, which is why hunger is still a persistent issue in rural areas. She stated that farmers are also consumers of the sugar that they produce, so the market's high commercial sugar prices affect them as well. She then inquired whether an assessment had been made comparing the declining purchasing power of farmers as consumers as a result of high sugar prices vis-à-vis its economic impact on them as sugar producers.

At this juncture, Senator Villanueva relinquished the chair to Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda.

In response, Senate President Zubiri lamented the growing number of idle farmlands caused by farmers' inability to cope with rising fertilizer prices. He stated that as a result, production had been negatively affected, resulting in lower or no yields. To illustrate, he stated that currently a P1,000 budget would only afford farmers about one-third of a Urea fertilizer bag—or about 20 kilograms of what was originally a 50 kilogram-purchase—because the current item price is already P2,700 per bag. He added that the current fertilizer price situation would equate to a meager coverage of only a few square meters of land. He also said that as profits decline, sugar cane farmers turn to subsistence farming. Furthermore, he stated that due to the lower quality of sugar cane yields, what was previously a P30,000 per hectare income would be reduced to P20,000 per hectare, or P1,700 per month.

Furthermore, he believed that the situation forced farmers to take out more loans, driving them deeper into poverty. In that regard, he informed the Body about idle farmlands in the provinces of Pampanga, Tarlac, Negros, and Bukidnon, which were abandoned by their farmers in order to work abroad as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). He believed that the phenomenon has resulted in the dwindling number of sugar workers toiling in the fields, further exposing the sector to abject poverty. He then emphasized the importance of the Body creating a market for sugar cane produce in order to improve the farmers' situation. In that regard, Senator Hontiveros thanked Senate President Zubiri for speaking up on behalf of the sugarcane farmers. She also expressed hope that the Body would be able to find ways to boost productivity while also improving equity in rural development.

Senate President Zubiri then informed the Body of Altertrade Philippines, Inc. (API), a group of ARBs in Negros. He revealed that the group was able to maximize the use of their sugar produce by producing a variety of high-value products such as sugar-coated banana chips. On that note, he emphasized the importance of

organizations such as cooperatives in improving farm yield quality. He added that his and Senator Hontiveros' work on the Committee on Cooperatives had given them the opportunity to meet cooperatives that are also ARBs in the sugar industry sector. He also mentioned that organizing themselves into cooperatives allowed farmers to mechanize their production, which eventually improved farm yields. He also expressed hope that their efforts to uplift the livelihoods of Filipinos in the rural areas would eventually put an end to the armed conflict problem once the average household income in the affected areas begins to rise.

Senator Hontiveros, on the other hand, stated that the API example exemplified the Senate President's vision for the Philippine countryside. She added that the cooperative had members who had previously been involved in internal armed conflict, but their membership in API provided them with a path back to a peaceful way of life through improved livelihood. In response, Senate President Zubiri stated that many of API's members were former commanders and combatants, but their inclusion with the ARBs brought them back into the fold.

INTERPELLATION OF SENATOR EJERCITO

Senator Ejercito informed the Body that he would like to associate himself with Senate President Zubiri's privilege speech, and that he shared the latter's frustration with the current state of the country's sugarcane industry. Hailing from the Province of Negros, he mentioned that he was the principal author of two laws that advanced the interests of the sugarcane farmers, to wit: 1) the Sugarcane Industry Development Act (SIDA) of 2015 and 2) Republic Act No. 10845, or the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016. In that regard, he sought explanation on what became of said laws enacted in order to strengthen and revitalize the sugarcane sector.

Senate President Zubiri responded that while he agreed with the sentiment of Senator Ejercito, he was not a senator at the time the laws were passed. He did, however, state that if he had been a Member of Congress at the time, he would have fought alongside Senator Ejercito for the wellbeing of sugarcane farmers. He also stated that when he returned to the Senate in 2016, he witnessed the SIDA's non-implementation. He added that the law, in its first year, was given a funding of P2 billion. However, he noted that the allocated amount dwindled over the years, becoming P1 billion the following year and eventually falling to P700 million.

He stated that according to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), underutilization of funds by the SRA has led to the funds not being returned to the National Treasury. He also recalled that during the committee hearings with the Department of Agrarian Reform, he repeatedly questioned the said underutilization, which then led to a decrease in budgetary allocation in the following year. Furthermore, he believed that the sugar industry's demand for farm-to-market roads, tractors, or other equipment was bound to reflect the quality of SRA's leadership at the time. He believed that the person in charge of the agency should have the best interests of farmers and consumers in mind, as well as the ability to translate that knowledge into action.

Senator Ejercito stated that the SRA was tasked with implementing and administering the SIDA. However, he observed that the agency appeared to focus on importation, overlooking its mandate to revitalize the industry. Senate President Zubiri concurred, as he lamented that despite the fact that the Legislative branch was able to pass many good laws, such as the SIDA and the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act, they end up as mere footnotes in law schools, studied but not implemented. On that note, he believed it was high time to advocate for the oversight function of the Senate committees in relation to the implementation of the laws passed by Congress which would allow the committees, particularly the Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform to assist the country's small farmers.

At this point, Senator Ejercito expressed his frustration over the non-implementation of the laws he principally authored, which he believed would strengthen the sugarcane industry. Furthermore, he stated that under the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act, large-scale economic smuggling is already considered a heinous crime punishable by 17 years of *reclusion perpetua* and the payment of fines.

As to whether he considers the personalities involved in the SRA fiasco guilty of economic sabotage, Senator Zubiri opined that if there is adequate proof in the findings of the Blue Ribbon Committee denoting a usurpation of authority, a plan to withhold imported sugar, or a manipulation of prices of particular products, then the committee may recommend the filing of appropriate charges to the Office of the Ombudsman.

At this point, he noted that several laws championed by Senator Ejercito in previous Congresses such as strengthening the Balanced Housing Development Program, the Universal Health Care Law, the SIDA, and the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Law have not been fully implemented. He then reiterated his call for improved oversight functions of Senate committees that would ensure proper implementation of the previously enacted laws.

Senator Ejercito concluded by lauding Senate President Zubiri for bringing the issue to the attention of the Body. He also expressed hope that by working with the latter, the country's sugarcane industry would be revitalized and strengthened particularly in the Province of Negros.

REFERRAL OF SPEECH TO COMMITTEE

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Chair referred the privilege speech of Senate President Zubiri and the interpellations therein to the Committee on Accountability of Public Officers and Investigations as the primary committee, and to the Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform as the secondary committee.

SUSPENSION OF SESSION

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, the session was suspended.

It was 5:16 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF SESSION

At 6:32 p.m., the session was resumed with Senate President Zubiri presiding.

REFERENCE OF BUSINESS

The Secretary of the Senate read Committee Report No. 1, prepared and submitted by the Committee on Rules, on Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139, with Senators Villanueva and Gatchalian as authors thereof, which was assigned to the Calendar for Ordinary Business, entitled

RESOLUTION AMENDING RULE IV, SECTION 6 AND RULE X, SECTIONS 13 AND 18 OF THE RULES OF THE SENATE,

recommending its approval, taking into consideration Proposed Senate Resolution No. 93.

Sponsor: Senator Villanueva

SPECIAL ORDER

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body approved the transfer of Committee Report No. 1 on Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139 from the Calendar for Ordinary Business to the Calendar for Special Orders.

PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 139

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body considered Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139, entitled

RESOLUTION AMENDING RULE IV, SECTION 6 AND RULE X, SECTIONS 13 AND 18 OF THE RULES OF THE SENATE,

taking into consideration Proposed Senate Resolution No. 93.

With the permission of the Body, only the title of the resolution was read without prejudice to the insertion of its full text into the *Record of the Senate*.

Thereupon, the Chair recognized Senator Villanueva for his sponsorship.

SPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

In sponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139, Senator Villanueva delivered the following speech:

It is my honor and privilege to sponsor the very first committee report of the Nineteenth Congress, Committee Report No. 1 under Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139. This is the amendment to our Senate *Rules*, specifically Rule IV, Section 6 and Rule X, Section 13 and 18.

The Committee on Rules convened last Tuesday, August 9, 2022, to discuss the proposed changes to our Rules.

To begin with, we discussed the roles of our Deputy Majority Leaders and Deputy Minority Leader, who will form part the membership of all the committees.

In addition, the Committee on Rules has decided to divide the committee on Basic Education, Arts and Culture into two committees – the Committee on Basic Education and the Committee on Arts and Culture.

By having a committee solely focused on the basic education system and in view of the enactment of Republic Act No. 11899, otherwise known as “The Creation of a Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II),” the committee can thoroughly look into the reforms and education and the much-needed review the K-12 curriculum.

On the other hand, the creation of the Committee on Arts and Culture will help us further legislate laws for the protection, preservation and promotion of the cultural, artistic and philosophical heritage of our country and our people.

Furthermore, a committee dedicated to our Overseas Filipino Workers will be carved out from the Committee on Labor, Employment and Human Resources Development.

The new committee will be mandated to legislate laws related to the protection of rights, safety and wellbeing of our modern Filipino heroes. This is also to support the Department of Migrant Workers which we worked very hard during the Eighteenth Congress.

In conclusion, we also widened the scope of the Committee on Cultural Communities to include matters relating to our fellow Muslim brothers and sisters.

As to the requests of our committee chairpersons to increase the number of membership in their respective committees, the Committee on Rules authorized this Representation as the chairperson of the Committee on Rules to act on this request as he deemed fit and meritorious.

In view of the foregoing, we propose to amend Rule IV, Section 6 and Rule X, Sections 13 and 18 of the *Rules of the Senate* as reflected in Committee Report No. 1.

TERMINATION OF THE PERIOD OF INTERPELLATIONS

There being no interpellation, upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body closed the period of interpellations and proceeded to the period of individual amendments.

VILLANUEVA AMENDMENTS

As proposed by Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body approved the following individual amendments, one after the other, subject to style:

1. As suggested by Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda, on page 2, line 19, replace the phrase “*ARTS AND CULTURE*” with CULTURE AND THE ARTS;
2. On page 4, line 26, change the word and figure “nine (9)” with “eleven (11)”; and
3. On page 5, line 15, change the word and figure “nineteen (19)” with “twenty (20)”;

PIMENTEL AMENDMENT

On page 7, lines 2 to 4, as proposed by Senator Pimentel and accepted by the Sponsor, there being no objection, the Body approved to transpose the sentence “THE DEPUTY MAJORITY LEADERS AND DEPUTY MINORITY LEADER SHALL BE MEMBERS OF ALL PERMANENT COMMITTEES” to Section 20 of the *Rules of the Senate* which will then read as follows:

SEC. 20. The President Pro Tempore and both the Majority and Minority Leaders of the Senate are *ex officio* members of all the permanent committees. THE DEPUTY MAJORITY LEADERS AND DEPUTY MINORITY LEADER SHALL BE MEMBERS OF ALL PERMANENT COMMITTEES.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY OF SENATOR PIMENTEL

Senator Pimentel asked if there would be changes in the quorum requirement in holding committee hearings as a result of the adoption of the proposed resolution. Senator Villanueva replied that there would be none, citing that the third paragraph of Section 22 of the *Rules of the Senate* would still be applicable as it provides that one-third of all the regular members of the committee shall constitute a quorum, but in no case shall it be less than two. However, Senator Pimentel stressed that the interpretation was that the presence of two members does not provide a quorum as one-third of the members are needed. He pointed out that the last phrase is already rendered moot and academic since the membership of the committees had been increased, but said that he would no longer propose for its deletion.

Adverting to Section 24 of the *Rules of the Senate* on who must approve the report, Senator Pimentel stated that it could be discussed at the committee level and that he would be proposing his amendment in a resolution which will be tackled in a meeting of the Committee on Rules.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY OF SENATOR DELA ROSA

Asked by Senator Dela Rosa on whether the current practice of the Members of requesting one of their colleagues to attend the committee hearing so that two Senators can constitute a quorum would no longer be allowed, Senate President Zubiri replied that another hearing would be held to settle the particular issue. In the meantime, he suggested that they retain the status quo.

Senator Villanueva underscored that no changes in quorum has been taken into consideration in changing the *Rules*.

Senator Dela Rosa concurred with Senate President Zubiri’s observation on the difficulty of mustering a quorum in committee hearings. He pointed out that increasing the quorum requirement is not practical, especially when several committee hearings are ongoing. Senate President Zubiri reiterated that the issue would be discussed in another meeting.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR ESTRADA

Expressing his support to the sentiments of Senator Dela Rosa, Senator Estrada said that the problem of quorum usually when a hearing is scheduled on Thursdays or Fridays as there would be no senators present on those days. He stated that as chair of the Committee on National Defense and Security, Peace, Unification

20

and Reconciliation which has 19 members, it would be so hard to muster a quorum as seven senators need to be physically present before a hearing can be conducted. Senate President Zubiri maintained that the issue would be discussed in another hearing as no amendment to the *Rules* has been presented and as such, the status quo remains.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

Pursuant to Section 20 of the *Rules of the Senate*, Senator Villanueva reiterated that one-third of all the regular members of the committee shall constitute a quorum but in no case shall it be less than two, and the presence of *ex officio* members may be considered in determining the existence of a quorum. However, he said that Section 20 also states that "the committee may authorize a fewer number of members to conduct public hearings on bills pending before it or to gather facts in aid of legislation." He informed the Body that the provision is quite flexible.

Senate President Zubiri underscored that it is not really the number of people listening in the committee hearings that is important but the actual signatures in the committee report which must be approved by majority of the regular and *ex officio* members.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR LEGARDA

Senator Legarda stated that the *Rules* may not have changed but noted that in every committee hearing she had attended since 1998, the rule on one-third of committee members was not always observed and they were not really literal about the *Rules*. She said that since there were more than 30 committees and there were only 24 Members, they interpreted the *Rules* liberally to accommodate the availability of each Member. She recalled that there was even an instance when she had to preside over a hearing and would even have to attend to another hearing but then leave after one minute just to comply with the quorum requirement.

At this juncture, Senator Legarda suggested that they do not amend the *Rules* but interpret it as the need arises and especially since committee hearings are held simultaneously. She noted that even during the time of Sen. Aquilino Pimentel Jr., the same rules existed but that hearings were allowed to be conducted even though only two senators were present. She averred that it is the substance of the committee report and the signatures that are important.

At this point, Senator Pimentel posited that since changes were being proposed to the *Rules*, then perhaps they could change the wording in the *Rules* to reflect the current practice. He disclosed that the Minority intends to follow a set line of questioning during the period of interpellations which starts with asking whether the *Rules* were followed in the proceedings. Secondly, he said that they will ask about the constitutionality of the measure. Finally, he said that they would also want to determine the wisdom behind the proposed measure.

He said that the Minority would ask whether there was a quorum during the committee hearings; thus it is crucial that they have a common interpretation of the *Rules*.

He pointed out that the two committee hearings held earlier that day by Senators Go and Padilla both had at least 33% or one-third of the total number of members for each committee. He then pointed out that suspending the committee hearings is one way to ensure that the succeeding hearing would push through and there would no longer be a need to call for another quorum.

Referring to the last sentence of Section 24, paragraph 4, he said that the Committee may authorize a fewer number of Members to conduct public hearings only after the committee had attained a valid quorum.

Thanking Senator Pimentel for his willingness to accept the current practice, Senate President Zubiri stated that another hearing will be scheduled to discuss the possible amendments to the *Rules* on the matter. He emphasized

that the current resolution did not contain any amendment on the question of quorum and the status quo would prevail for the meantime.

Senator Pimentel agreed that the Body should proceed with the approval of the proposed amendments and the issue that he had raised should be discussed at the committee level.

TERMINATION OF THE PERIOD OF INDIVIDUAL AMENDMENTS

There being no other individual amendment, upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body closed the period of individual amendments.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 139

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, Proposed Senate Resolution No. 139 was adopted by the Body.

PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 95

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body considered Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95, entitled

RESOLUTION RECONSTITUTING THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MARAWI CITY REHABILITATION.

Pursuant to Section 67, Rule XXIII of the *Rules of the Senate*, with permission of the Body, only the title of the resolution was read without prejudice to the insertion of its text into the *Record of the Senate*.

Thereupon, the Chair recognized Senator Villanueva for sponsorship.

SPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

In sponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95, Senator Villanueva delivered the following speech:

It has been five years since the five-month long siege of Marawi City from May 23, 2017, which displaced at least 49,785 families. Despite the time that has lapsed, the wounds are still fresh, and the memories of such destruction and chaos still haunt us today.

Since then, pooled efforts from both the public and the private sectors have been put together to rebuild the City of Marawi. As may be recalled by our colleagues, it was in the Seventeenth Congress that we first created the Special Committee on Marawi City Rehabilitation through Adopted Resolution No. 57, then sponsored by Sen. JV Ejercito.

In the Eighteenth Congress, to continue providing support to the rehabilitation of the city, no less than our Senate President himself, Sen. Migz Zubiri, sponsored Adopted Resolution No. 8 to reconstitute the special committee.

At present, the accomplishment report of the Task Force Bangon Marawi as of July 2022 provided us insights on some of the initiatives and programs undertaken and ongoing in Marawi.

First, the development of Marawi's main affected areas include the implementation of key projects, such as debris management, construction of roads with utilities and key government buildings. Some of these have been completed, including, among others: debris management and clearing of unexploded bombs; 18 barangay complexes with health centers at various times from May 2021 to April 2022; road infrastructure with utilities; and bridges, such as the Mapandi Bridge, Banggolo Bridge, and Agus Bridge III, which is also a pumping station.

Number two, other structures are undergoing construction, such as the Main Affected Area Bulk Water Supply,

eight school buildings, grand Pagadian Central Market, and others; while some projects are undergoing procurement, such as sewage treatment plant, Phase 2 of the hospital, and the kiln dryer livelihood project, among others.

For utilities, the National Electrification Administration is currently undertaking the construction of power distribution lines for the power supply. The Local Water Utilities Administration installed temporary water pumps, which service the returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) while awaiting the completion of the bulk water system.

Next, the rehabilitation of six mosques and other undergoing construction have been reported, including the completion of the Disomangcop Mosque, Darussalam Mosque, and White Mosque.

Lastly, TESDA provided skills training for our IDPs. Among 15,710 total enrollees since 2017, some 13,649 have graduated; 10,714 have been assessed; and 8,591 have been awarded with National Certificates.

These are just some of the accomplishments of the Task Force Bangon Marawi.

This year, we also passed into law Republic Act No. 11696 or the Marawi Siege Victims Compensation Act of 2022, led by our seatmate, Sen. Sonny Angara and for which this Representation is also a cosponsor and coauthor. The law, among others, provides for tax-free compensation to owners of residential, cultural, commercial structures, and other properties in the main and other affected areas. It will also provide for compensation to those whose private properties will be affected by the Marawi Recovery, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Program.

The work continues. The siege was not a war of their own making at it is the government's obligation to restore the dignity of the people of Marawi and rebuild this city. Thus, I urge our dear colleagues to support this resolution for the reconstitution of the Special Committee on Marawi City Rehabilitation to allow it to get back to work and oversee the continuous rehabilitation of Marawi City.

COSPONSORSHIP REMARKS OF SENATOR PADILLA

In cosponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95, Senator Padilla highlighted the deficiencies of the Marawi Siege Victims Compensation Act, stating that the beneficiaries are still waiting for their compensation because there is still no appropriation for the fund.

He informed the Members that he had filed a resolution urging the immediate constitution of the Marawi Compensation Board in hopes of expediting the appropriation and release of the funds to the beneficiaries.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATE PRESIDENT ZUBIRI

Senate President Zubiri assured Senator Padilla that he will convey to the Executive branch during the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC) meeting that the latter's resolution will form part of the Senate's priority measures.

He also informed Senator Padilla that he was adding the Marawi Victims Compensation Act to the title of the proposed resolution that was under discussion.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR HONTIVEROS

Senator Hontiveros expressed her support for the immediate rehabilitation of Marawi, and said that she had coauthored two of Senator Padilla's resolutions on the issue.

COSPONSOR

Upon his request, Senator Estrada was made cosponsor of Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 95

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95 was adopted by the Body.

INQUIRY OF SENATE PRESIDENT ZUBIRI

Queried by Senate President Zubiri as to who would head the committee, Senator Villanueva replied that Senator Dela Rosa would be the chairperson of the Special Committee on Marawi City Rehabilitation as the latter held the position in the previous Congress.

PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 127

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body considered Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, entitled

RESOLUTION EXPRESSING DEEPEST SYMPATHY AND SINCERE CONDOLENCES OF THE SENATE OF THE PHILIPPINES ON THE DEATH OF A SPORTS LEGEND AND “ASIA’S FASTEST WOMAN” LYDIA DE VEGA,

taking into consideration Proposed Senate Resolution Nos. 129, 130, 131, 132, 135, 137, 138, and 140.

Pursuant to Section 67, Rule XXIII of the *Rules of the Senate*, with permission of the Body, only the title of the resolution was read without prejudice to the insertion of its text into the *Record of the Senate*.

Thereupon, the Chair recognized Senator Villanueva for sponsorship.

SPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

In sponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, Senator Villanueva delivered the following speech:

A runner has just rested.

It was definitely hard to hear, but on August 10, 2022, our country just lost another icon.

Lydia de Vega-Mercado, also known by her closest loved ones as “Ate Diay,” joined our Almighty God, the Eternal rest she could ever have after running a life worth emulating.

To the bereaved family of Lydia de Vega, our deepest sympathies. The entire nation, our fellow *Bulakeños*, and every Filipino are with your family in this hardest of times. Thank you for lending us the fastest woman in Asia who chose the longest path of being an athlete and a public servant.

While most of us have our own marathons in life, Ate Diay reminded us that the hardest and the longest races are not those that start with the gunfire and end with the finish line ribbon, but the way you live your life for your country and your countrymen.

Born in the city of Meycauayan, Bulacan, a legend who brought the Philippines to the pedestal of athletics and sports, Lydia de Vega evoked in us our truest identity as a Filipino.

Growing up in Bocaue, Bulacan, I looked up to Ate Diay as one of my role models, not only because she was a fellow Bulaceño, but because she reminded me of my grandfather, Joaquin Villanueva, who was likewise an Olympic sprinter who represented the Philippines in the Far Eastern Games in the 1920s for four consecutive years.

Kahit na po ako ay isang basketballista, lumaki po akong iniidolo si Ate Diay. Natatandaan ko po noong elementary days that I have to go from Bocaue to Valenzuela. There were times na makikita ko po siya na kasama si tatang na tini-train siya sa McArthur Highway. At iyon po ay nagbigay sa akin ng napakalaking inspirasyon.

As the quintessential student athlete during her days at the Far Eastern University, she served as one of my inspirations to play basketball in the collegiate level. I was also motivated to play for the Philippine National Team, as I watched Lydia, time and time again, make the country proud as she dominated all the international competitions. Clothed in the Philippine flag, she was a two-time Olympian in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and Seoul respectively, finishing at sixth place in both competitions.

In her roster of accomplishments as an athlete, she also brought home a gold medal in the 100-meter dash events in New Delhi in 1982; in Seoul Asian Games in 1986; and in the Southeast Asian Games in 1981, 1987, 1991, and 1994. She was inducted into the Philippine Sports Hall of Fame in 2018, formally enshrining her as a Philippine sport's heroine.

She kept on running as she also served as a city councilor, devoting herself to her fellow *Meycauaeños* from 2001 to 2004, and took on the role of a coach by passing on her skills and knowledge to the next generation of aspiring track and field stars, all while being a devoted wife to her husband, Paul, and a loving mother to their children.

In 2005, she was appointed as liaison officer of the Alliance of Coaches and Athletes of the Philippines with the Philippine Sports Commission.

Ate Diay, salamat po sa pagtakbo sa takbuhin ng paglilingkod bilang isang ina, anak, asawa, at bilang isang Pilipino.

Maraming salamat sa pagpapaalala na ang bawat paltos sa ating mga talampakan ay may katumbas na gintong medalya.

Let us learn from Ate Diay De Vega-Mercado that life is not measured by meters or kilometers but by the number of finish lines we have overcome trying to make a difference in this world.

To our fellow Filipinos, especially the youth, this woman we honor today is a woman of pride, prowess, and persistence. But more than that, she is a woman of faith.

Ngayong araw na ito ginugunita ang ika-444 years founding anniversary ng Dakilang Lalawigan ng Bulacan.

At kaya ngayong araw din na ito napakasarap i-honor ang kapwa Bulakeño na masasabi natin, as I end my speech, just like the parable of the footprints in the sand: perhaps, Lydia De Vega is no longer running, God is now carrying her on his back, reassuring her that in heaven there is no more pain and the finish line is already within reach.

Maraming salamat po, at pagpalain tayong lahat ng ating Panginoong Diyos.

COSPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR ESTRADA

In cosponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, Senator Estrada delivered the following speech:

I stand in line to honor the late Lydia De Vega-Mercado, a remarkable Filipino who put the Philippines on the world map as Asia's fastest woman.

Bagamat naiulat ang pagiging malubha ng kaniyang kalagayan isang linggo na ang nakaraan, naging mabigat pa rin ang balita ng kaniyang pagpanaw noong Miyerkules ng gabi.

Ang pagbuhos ng pakikipagdalamhati sa mga naulila ni Diay ay hindi na nakapagtataka lalo na at tumatak siya sa kamalayan ng nakararami sa atin sa larangan ng pampalakasan ilang dekada na ang nakararaan.

Sa mundong kinabilangan niya na tradisyonal na pinangungunahan ng mga kalalakihan, si Lydia ang nagsilbing inspirasyon sa mga Pilipinang atleta at nag-angat ng antas ng kababaihan sa talaan ng Philippine sports.

Sa loob ng tatlung taon, hindi nagawang mabura ang kaniyang national at Southeast Asian record na 11.28 seconds sa 100-meter event na kaniyang naitala sa 1987 SEA Games sa Indonesia. Inabot din ng mahigit tatlong dekada bago nahigitan ang 200-meter Philippine record ni Lydia sa track and field.

Maybe in another lifetime we will come across another female giant of Philippine sports and topple her victories in 53 international competitions.

Hindi madaling mapantayan ang iniukit sa kasaysayan ng Philippine sports ni Lydia De Vega—isang national treasure na maituturing na one of the greatest athletes the country has ever produced.

Sa kaniyang pinakahuling laban, hindi na nagawang mapagtagumpayan ni Lydia ang hamon na kaniyang hinarap. Ito na ang final lap ni Lydia De Vega.

Paalam, Lydia. Maraming salamat sa maraming beses na pagwagayway ng watawat ng Pilipinas para ipamalas ang galing ng atletang Pilipino. Rest well, you fought a good fight. Rest well, Lydia De Vega.

COSPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR GO

In cosponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, Senator Go, chairperson of the Senate Committee on Sports, delivered the following statement:

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Sports, I join the entire nation in expressing condolences on the demise of Lydia De Vega Mercado. My heart goes out to the bereaved family and friends of the Filipina sports legend, and likewise to the entire Filipino people, over the death of a great renowned Filipino athlete. I offer my heartfelt sympathy and wish them peace, comfort, and strength at this time of sorrow. My thoughts and prayers are with you.

Lydia started her humble beginnings as a member of the Gintong Alay Track and Field Program, a national sports program which was introduced during the 1980s. She was mentored under the guidance of her father, Francisco De Vega, together with Claro Pellosis who wrote the program for the late track and field icon.

Her appearance at the 1981 Southeast Asian Games significantly made an impact as she was able to victoriously capture gold medals in the 200 and 400-meter events, thereby exemplifying excellence in the sport, and upholding the spirit of sportsmanship and camaraderie. Indeed, a legendary superstar in the making.

She was not dubbed as Asia's fastest woman during the '80s for nothing. Her astounding journey as an athlete paved the way for claiming our rightful place in the international arena of sports, having been competing and successfully winning multiple international competitions, which include nine gold medals in the Southeast Asian Games, four gold medals in the Asian Athletics Championships, and two gold medals in the Asian Games.

Lydia may have ran her final lap in this lifetime, but she will always be remembered as one of the most decorated and adored athletes of our country. *Isa sa mga natatanging atleta na tumatak hindi lamang sa kamalayan ng ating bayan, kundi sa buong mundo ng palakasan. Ang kanya pong mga naibahagi sa kasaysayan ng sports ay maituturing nating isang kayamanan.*

Tunay po niyang pinatunayan na kayang mamayagpag at makipagsabayan ng ating bansa sa iba't ibang lahi. Sa kanyang bawat pagtakbo ay dala-dala niya ang pag-asa ng napakaraming Pilipino: ang pag-asa na makakamtan ang tagumpay sa pamamagitan ng lakas ng loob, tiwala sa sarili, at higit sa lahat may pananampalataya sa Diyos.

Ako po ay nakikiisa sa pagbibigay-dalamhati sa pamilya at kaibigan sa pagkawala ng isa sa maituturing nating haligi ng Philippine sports. Ang kanyang mga alaala sa ating mga naiwan ay mananatili sa isip at puso ng bawat Pilipino.

COSPONSORSHIP SPEECH OF SENATOR HONTIVEROS

In cosponsoring Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, Senator Hontiveros expressed her heartfelt condolences to the De Vega and Mercado families, and requested to be made a cosponsor of the resolution honoring the late sports icon, Lydia De Vega.

She stated that Lydia De Vega's golden victory at the 1981 SEA Games cemented her place in the Philippine sports history as one of the most recognizable female athletes in the country, adding that her excellence on the track inspired women and girls to seek greatness in their own pursuits. She said that Lydia's ascent to prominence in the field of sports was made even more remarkable when her achievements took place at a time when women were underrepresented and under-resourced; her pursuit of excellence throughout her career earned her nine gold medals at the SEA Games and six more at the Asian Games. Moreover, she said that Ms. De Vega's wins earned her the title "Asia's Fastest Woman" which inspired a generation of athletes.

She hoped that the Body would remember and embody the values that propelled Lydia De Vega to her place in our history: discipline, perseverance, and tenacity.

MANIFESTATION OF SENATOR VILLANUEVA

Senator Villanueva manifested that Senators Revilla, Gatchalian, Binay, Dela Rosa, Cayetano (P), and Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda would submit their cosponsorship speech on the resolution for insertion into the *Journal and Record of the Senate*.

COSPONSORSHIP SPEECHES

Pursuant to the manifestation of Senator Villanueva, the following cosponsorship speeches on Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127 were deemed read into the *Journal and Record of the Senate*:

By Senator Revilla

Noong nakaraang linggo, isang malungkot na balita na naman ang dumating sa atin: ang pagpanaw ng isa sa mga pinaka-mahuhusay na kababayan natin sa larangan ng sports o palakasan - si Lydia de Vega-Mercado.

Nakikidalamhati tayo sa buong bansa sa pagpanaw ng isang sports legend at hinirang na Asia's Fastest Woman ng kanyang panahon.

Today I sponsor Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127 to honor the life of a sports legend, a true Filipina, and a national treasure. It has been said that the best commendation on occasions like this do not come from the speakers, but from the legacy of the person being remembered.

Ms. Lydia became the first Filipina and Asian to win back-to-back gold medals for the 100-meter dash at the 1982 New Delhi and 1986 Seoul Asian Games. She represented the Philippines twice in the Olympics—1984 Los Angeles and 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Lydia has fortified herself as the best in the track and field arena in Asia after consistently winning gold in the 100 meters at the 1987, 1991, and 1993 SEA Games, while also winning the 200-meter event in 1981, 1983, 1987, and 1993 of the meet. *Isa siyang tunay na halimbawa ng kahusayan sa kanyang tatlong dekadang pamamayagpag sa pambansang talaan ng 100-meter at 200-meter dash.*

She is a decorated Filipino sports figure who brought great pride to the country by triumphantly winning numerous international gold medals in track and field competitions. As "Asia's Fastest Woman" and "Asia's Sprint Queen," she dominated the Asian Games, Asian Athletics Championships, and the Southeast Asian Games.

Her achievements not only serve as an honor to the country, but also shone the light of inspiration to generations upon generations of aspiring and promising Filipino athletes. *Naging tanglaw ng kabataan at bagong henerasyon ng mga manlalaro ang kwento ng tagumpay ng kanyang buhay.*

Ang tagumpay ng isang Lydia de Vega ay naging simula at patunay na kayang mamayagpag ng isang babae sa larangan ng sports. Hindi naging hadlang ang kasarian upang ipamalas niya sa ating bayan at sa buong mundo ang kanyang husay. Ang mismong istorya ng kanyang buhay ay patuloy na dadagundong saan mang sulok ng ating bansa. And the pursuit of excellence by the life she lived will always be discussed in physical education classes; will always be recognized in the sports community; and will always reverberate in people's memories.

As the whole nation mourns the loss of one of its greatest athletes whose indelible mark will forever be etched in history, we likewise honor her life and legacy—*isang pamana na hindi nag-wakas sa kanyang pagreretiro sa pagiging aktibong atleta.*

Because like all legends, her greatness echoed beyond the arena. *Hindi nga natapos ang kanyang 'di-matatawarang kontribusyon sa larangan ng sports at karangalan ng bansa sa kanyang pagreretiro. Ipinagpatuloy niya ang kanyang adbokasiya at pagiging inspirasyon sa mga kabataan sa pamamagitan ng paghubog niya sa mga batang atleta at mga kababayan nating nais sumabak sa sports sa kabila ng kanilang mga kapansanan. It is a true testament to her dedication to her craft, and her magnanimity in the field.*



She is truly an Asian track and field legend—who has excellently personified the admirable traits of a Filipina—passionate, determined, disciplined, and stunningly graceful in all her endeavors.

Sa iyong paglisan, mananatiling alamat at inspirasyon ang bawat karangalang ibinigay mo sa ating bansa.

Paalam sa iyo, Ms. Lydia.

By Senator Gatchalian

I join this Chamber and our *kababayans* in mourning the loss of a Filipino sports icon, legend, and heroine Lydia De Vega-Mercado, whom we remember with pride, gratitude, and love as Asia's Fastest Woman.

As we celebrate the life and legacy of Lydia, or Diay to her friends, I cannot help but recall her last public appearance at the opening of the 2019 Southeast Asian Games, or SEA Games, where she served as one of the flag bearers alongside other sports icons. As Lydia entered and walked the stage to the cheers and adulation of spectators, those who witnessed her record-breaking races could not escape a sweeping sense of pride and nostalgia. In a way, her last public appearance seals our collective memory of her as a source of national pride and as a role model for younger Filipino athletes.

As I said last week when news broke out of her passing, she inspired and continues to inspire the future generation of Filipino athletes, especially the young women who are bent on breaking both barriers and records to make a name for themselves and to uplift the country's spirit.

Lydia's four-decade career had its remarkable opening salvo when she was only 16 during the 1981 SEA Games in Manila, where she won the 200-meter and 400-meter golds. But it was during the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi where she made heads turn, winning her heat in 100 meters in 11.77 seconds. She would later clip off another 1/100 seconds to win the finals from her opponents.

From 1981, Lydia won a total of 15 gold medals across multiple international sports competitions, including nine from five SEA Games, four from two Asian Athletics Championships (AAC), and two from two Asian Games. Lydia also won a total of five silvers and two bronze medals—three silvers in AAC, a silver each in the SEA Games and Asian Games, and all two Bronze medals in the AAC. She was also a two-time Olympian, participating in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic games.

From 1987 until 2020, Lydia held the Philippine Record in 100 meters at 11.28 seconds. She also held the National 200-meter record for 32 years—from 1987 until 2019—at 23.35 seconds. Her National and National Junior Record in 400-meters stood from 1981 until 2013. And as of December 2020, she held two Philippine Records in the 60 meters and 200-meters Junior Women's.

Lydia De Vega has finished the race and fought the good fight. Tributes will continue to pour in to celebrate the life she lived in full and the decorated career that continues to capture our imagination.

For this Representation, honoring her life and legacy requires giving all-out support to our athletes. The challenge for us in this Chamber, to our fellow workers in government, and to our partners from different sectors is to ensure that athletes receive gold standard treatment throughout the different stages of their career.

In achieving this goal, we have already made significant steps, including the passage of Republic Act No. 11470, which established the National Academy of Sports. Through this law which we passed during the Eighteenth Congress, we finally institutionalized financial, infrastructural, and policy support for aspiring Filipino athletes. By providing a quality secondary education program and a special curriculum on sports, we give aspiring athletes a boost in unlocking their full potential.

This law also mandates the construction of nationally-funded regional high schools for sports to foster the development of young athletes in other parts of the country. It is my earnest hope that someone among these student-athletes will follow in the footsteps of Lydia De Vega and other sports legends to build on the enduring legacies they have left behind.

Having the National Academy of Sports is just one way to support our athletes, but there is still so much more that we can do. It is high time we fulfill the promise of giving our athletes the support that they deserve.

At this point, I would like to once again extend my sincerest condolences to Lydia's bereaved family. I am expressing my solidarity with the sports community that is mourning the loss of one of its icons. And lastly, I join our *kababayans* in remembering the triumph of the Filipino spirit in the world stage and in the hearts of our *kababayans*.

For these reasons, I call on our distinguished colleagues to support the passage of this resolution in honor of our legendary sprint queen.

By Senator Binay

The current generation of Filipinos might never grasp just how iconic Lydia de Vega-Mercado was. Yet, for a whole generation especially of Filipinas, she embodied the heights that the Filipino could reach.

As a girl growing up in the 80s, I was among those who deeply admired Lydia de Vega. She was a hero, faster, better, stronger than the rest of the competition. That we shared the same color of skin, the same facial features, the same height and build, was a point of pride for us. She gave us hope that we could also achieve what she had achieved—that greatness, too, was within our grasp. *Kakulay namin, kamukha namin, kaya, kaya rin namin.*

The "Fastest Woman in Asia" blazed a trail that the next generation of Filipina athletes could traverse with less obstacles than she had to face.

I join the whole nation in mourning the passing of a great Filipina. I hope not only that we remember her, but that we also do our part so those who did not have the pleasure of seeing her in action and being acquainted with her story will get to know her, and be inspired by how she surmounted the odds to become the beloved champion that she had been throughout her life. *At nawa'y dumami pa ang katulad niyang magtataguyod ng bandera ng ating mahal na bansa.*

By Senator Dela Rosa

I rise to cosponsor Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127, taking into consideration Proposed Senate Resolution Nos. 129, 130, 131, 132, 135, and 137 expressing the deepest sympathy and sincere condolences of the Senate of the Philippines on the death of a sports legend and "Asia's Fastest Woman" Lydia De Vega. It is with great sadness to know that this year, we lost another legendary figure that had inspired our nation: an athlete, mother, and a woman, who served as a symbol of courage and hope for the Filipino people.

I have heard of her greatness. *At alam kong marami sa atin ay kilala rin siya bilang "Asia's Fastest Woman."* She was always a fighter. On multiple occasions, she fought to bring us gold medals against other countries. And most importantly, she fought to live by her belief to never surrender, even when it got painful. In fact, she was silently waging a final battle against cancer, but that was the kind of person she was—quietly faithful to the end.

She once shared these words: *"Matalo ka man, bumangon ka, mag ensayo kang mabuti, dahil sa susunod na laban, maaring ikaw naman ang tumayo sa pedestal at tumanggap ng gold medal na 'yan. 'Wag kayong mawawalan ng pag-asa."*

Truly, the one who wins in life is the person who chooses to move forward, even when it's agonizing and inconvenient. Those who have walked the path of champions know full well that the sweetness of victory comes only after all the hardships and failures. Although she has gone ahead of us, we choose to remember her as a champion, not only in track and field, but in running the race of life.

Borrowing from the words of the Good Book, Lydia De Vega has fought the good fight, she has finished the race, and she has kept the faith. May we always follow her example.

By Senator Cayetano (P)

I express my sympathy and condolences for the passing of sprint legend, Lydia de Vega. De Vega blazed an uncharted trail for Philippine sports. Her achievements opened opportunities for generations of Filipino athletes to

follow. She brought immense honor to our country as Asia's Sprint Queen and made significant contributions to the development of Philippine sports. She was a nine-time Southeast Asian Games gold medalist, and reigned over the sprint double in the 1983 and 1987 Asian Athletics Championships.

A testament to De Vega's greatness were the national track records she set in the eighties which stood unchallenged for three decades. After retiring from the sport in 1994, she coached and trained younger athletes in track and field in the Philippines and Singapore. In 1983, when I was part of the NCR Volleyball team and Lydia was in the NCR track team, one of the highlights of my experience as a Palarong Pambansa athlete was when I was one with the crowd scrambling up the bleachers to get a good view to watch her compete. Anyone who had seen her sprint live would swear how she embodied grace in motion. Among her last known public appearances was at the opening ceremonies of the 2019 Southeast Asian Games, which the Philippines hosted and where our athletes showcased a new generation of Filipino sports heroes, undoubtedly inspired by the legends who came before them, including Lydia.

I join our people in mourning the passing of a national treasure who broke barriers for women athletes. My sincerest condolences to her family who supported her through her toughest race. *Salamat, Lydia de Vega, sa dangal na inialay mo sa bayan na kailanman ay di mapapantayan.*

By Senate President Pro Tempore Legarda

On August 10, the country lost one of the most remarkable Filipinas not only in Philippine history, but also in the history of Asia.

Lydia de Vega is a national treasure, a one-of-a-kind sportswoman, and a track and field legend full of dedication and passion. She vigorously trained to earn 15 gold medals in numerous international competitions, including nine from the SEA Games, two from the Asian Games, and four from the Asian Athletics Championships. Her commitment and hard work have earned her the title of Asia's fastest woman.

Even in retirement, she remained dedicated to the country. She pursued a career in politics as a Councilor of Meycauayan, Bulacan—her hometown. She also served as a sports consultant to the Office of the Governor of Bulacan.

Without a doubt, Lydia was a fighter. She fought to bring pride and glory to the Philippines as an athlete. She fought to better our country as a public servant. And she fought for four years before succumbing to her tragic disease. The country will never forget her victories and her dedication. Her victories will always be remembered as triumphs of the Filipino spirit. Her struggles and failures will always serve as a reminder to stand tall in the face of overwhelming odds. Her story will forever be one of persistence, discipline, and grit.

Embodying the dreams, aspirations, fears, and even heartbreaks of the Filipino people, she became the country's flag bearer on many occasions in the international arena alongside the world's best athletes. In the 2019 SEA Games opening ceremonies, Lydia became the country's flag bearer for the last time. Despite battling cancer even then, she chose to carry the Philippine flag until her last breath.

Saludo po ako sayo, Lydia de Vega. Maraming salamat po sa iyong walang pagod na paglilingkod sa bayan at sa bayanihan! Hindi ka namin malilimutan.

With respect to one of the most reputable Filipina athletes, I would like to be made coauthor and cosponsor of the measure.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 127

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, Proposed Senate Resolution No. 127 was adopted by the Body.



RECONSIDERATION OF THE APPROVAL OF PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 95

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body reconsidered the adoption of Proposed Senate No. 95 (RESOLUTION RECONSTITUTING THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MARAWI CITY REHABILITATION).

As a consequence, upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body reopened the period of amendments.

ZUBIRI AMENDMENT

On the title of the resolution, subject to style and wherever applicable, with the permission of the Body, as proposed by Senate President Zubiri and accepted by the Sponsor, there being no objection, the Body approved the insertion of the words AND VICTIMS COMPENSATION after the word "REHABILITATION," so that the title of the measure would now read:

RESOLUTION RECONSTITUTING THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MARAWI CITY
REHABILITATION AND VICTIMS COMPENSATION.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 95

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, Proposed Senate Resolution No. 95 was adopted by the Body, subject to style.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMISSION ON APPOINTMENTS

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, Senators Marcos, Cayetano (A), Legarda, Escudero, Poe, Binay, Ejercito, Estrada, and Hontiveros were elected members to the Commission on Appointments.

APPROVAL OF THE JOURNAL

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Body dispensed with the reading of the Journal of Session No. 8 (August 9, 2022) and the Journal of Session No. 9 (August 10, 2022) and considered them approved.

ADJOURNMENT OF SESSION

Upon motion of Senator Villanueva, there being no objection, the Chair declared the session adjourned until three o'clock in the afternoon of the following day.

It was 7:26 p.m.

I hereby certify to the correctness of the foregoing.

ATTY. RENATO N. BANTUG JR.
Secretary of the Senate

Approved on August 17, 2022

92