

Senate passes over 400 bills enacted into law: Sotto

MANILA -- The Senate of the 17th Congress has left behind an achievement of passing 464 bills that were enacted into law, some of which are landmark pieces of legislation that aim to uplift the lives of Filipinos.

In his valedictory speech on Tuesday, Senate President Vicente Sotto III said the chamber was able to deliver on its promise to continue in helping the passage of laws that will be "beneficial to the country and to every Filipino."

Among the notable landmark laws include the Bangsamoro Organic Law, National Identification System, Uni-

versal Health Care Law, Mental Health Act, Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, Mandatory Phil-Health Coverage, Corporation Code of the Philippines, Telecommuting Law, Magna Carta of the Poor, and the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program Act.

Sotto also highlighted that the Philippine Senate reached the highest satisfaction rating since 2012 with a 72 percent mark for the first quarter of 2019, according to the Social Weather Stations survey.

"These figures could not have been garnered without the

dedication and focus of each of the Senators of the 17th Congress. My thanks go to all of you, my colleagues," Sotto said.

The Senate leader also touted the chamber's independence, by preserving the doctrine of separation of powers and insisting on the due process of law when it came to legislative documents.

He particularly cited as an example the 2019 budget impasse, wherein the Senate contended that no post-ratification amendments be made.

"In those two months of stalemate, we insisted on our position, and made

known our stand when the budget was submitted to the Office of the President," Sotto said.

"Though we eventually signed, we made known our observations, and the Executive Department sustained our position," he added.

Sotto hopes that the independence of the Senate can be maintained in the next Congress.

"We wish the coming Senate to carry on the task we are passing on to them. Let us remain cooperative but independent, balanced, transparent and sincere," Sotto said. (PNA)

DepEd adds skills training to expanded ALS program

MANILA -- The Department of Education (DepEd) has included skills training in its Alternative Learning System (ALS) education to empower the youth who plan to work while studying.

With the aim to intensify and expand the regular ALS program, which is considered "the centerpiece of basic education under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration", the DepEd launched on Tuesday the Alternative Learning System-Education and Skills Training (ALS-EST) Program Handbook for Implementers at the SEAMEO Innotech in Quezon City.

The DepEd added a skills training component to the ALS education in addition to the basic subjects such as history, math, and science. Students enrolled in the program can now be trained in food and house-keeping, electronics and welding, wellness, dressmaking, agriculture and carpentry.

Undersecretary and Chief of Staff Nepomuceno Malaluan told

reporters that DepEd would allocate supplementary funds for the training facilities and for those who will facilitate the training.

"The ALS skills training has already started in 98 pilot schools but DepEd targets all public schools to have ALS skills training. The next challenge is the scale up or mainstreaming of these pilot programs," Malaluan said.

According to the Annual Poverty Indicator Survey in 2017, around 1.43 million children and youth aged 6 to 17 years are out of school and have not completed basic education.

The DepEd aims to bring these out of school children and youth through the ALS-EST, which is a complementary program to the mainstream ALS.

The program also aims to "holistically prepare learners for various exits, such as higher education, middle-level skills development, entrepreneurship, and employment by integrating a skills training component with the basic ed-

ucation component".

"Non-formal education is not second-class education, it is a modality, a pathway, and for many learners, a second or even first chance at education. This is the framework and motivation that drives the ALS-EST Program," Malaluan added.

The DepEd distributed 150 copies of the handbook to stakeholders who contributed to its completion and production.

HUDCC chief to ask COA to allow fund transfer for Hajj

MANILA -- Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC) chair Eduardo del Rosario said Wednesday that he will write an appeal to the Commission on Audit (COA) not to disallow the transfer of PHP5 million worth of Marawi rehabilitation funds to pay for a 2018 Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

Del Rosario, who also chairs Task Force Bangon Marawi (TF-BM), made this remark

after the COA tagged the fund transfer as "not among the authorized expenses" in the agreement signed between the Office of the President (OP) and the HUDCC.

In its audit report, COA said the HUDCC diverted the PHP5-million worth of Marawi rehabilitation funds to the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF).

The amount was taken from the PHP500-million fund of the OP

CHED launches new research lab on drugs abuse

MANILA -- A drug testing kit, which can identify designer drugs for effective law enforcement, is now within reach as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) launched on Tuesday the University of the Philippines-Manila Drugs Abuse Research Laboratory (UP-DARL).

CHED chair J. Prospero de Vera III said the UP-DARL is a research collaboration between UP Manila and University of California, which aims to address the gaps identified in responding to the current problem of drug use and abuse in the country.

It is fully-funded by the CHED, through the Philippine-California Advanced Research Institutes program. It also involves the participation of the member agencies of the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) such as CHED, Department of Health (DOH), Philippine National Police (PNP), Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), and National Bureau of Investigation (NBI).

"The current drug testing that we have is used for identifying between three to four drugs only, marijuana,

cocaine, etc., it cannot detect the designer drugs. So, our law enforcement officers are handicapped because, if they are able to arrest suspects and confiscate drugs, it is difficult to prove in court because there is no evidence in court that it is an illegal drug," de Vera told reporters on the sidelines of the launch.

Using liquid "ecstasy" as an example of commonly confiscated designer drugs, de Vera stressed the need for a "continuous testing to identify additional psychoactive substances" often abused by the youth.

"The technology is already available in the United States through the University of California in San Francisco. It is linking with UP Manila to transfer technology, help people in the Philippines, have the machines available, and as much as possible, we will roll this out to all law enforcement agencies like PDEA, NBI, PNP, DOH so we could do comprehensive drug testing in the country,"

war-torn Marawi City.

"Hajj is a solemn obligation and wish of every Muslim. It is so important to them that

he added.

He said they expect to complete the drug testing kit in two years, which can identify more than 100 illegal drugs, while they work on an "interim drug testing kit that can at least identify additional substances, which are impossible to spot with the country's current technology".

To create healthy and safe campuses, de Vera said CHED has been working of drug-free learning environment for college students for years.

"This is already integrated in most of the drug tests in the country...what we expect in the universities is there will mandatory random drug testing for students," he added.

In line with this project, the UP-DARL held a Conference on Substances of Abuse in the Philippines on June 4 to 5. It aims to impart knowledge on various substances of abuse, including new psychoactive substances, to physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and analysts. (PNA)

billeting while the IDPs stay in Saudi Arabia for a month.

Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is the

which it allocated to HUDCC for Marawi City rehabilitation projects, it added.

"We are writing an appeal to COA not to disallow this vital transaction, and besides, the PHP5 million was properly dispensed by NCMF," del Rosario said in a message to reporters.

He insisted that the Hajj pilgrimage, which he described as "part of the social healing process", is also part of the over-all rehabilitation of

social healing is envisioned in the process," he said.

Del Rosario noted that a raffle was conducted to select internally displaced persons (IDPs) who were "luckily picked" to join the Hajj pilgrimage.

"We sponsored IDPs who were then living in the evacuation centers and transitional shelter," he added.

Under the deal, he said the NCMF will facilitate the processing of travel documents, payment of airfares and

pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which every adult Muslim must make at least once in his or her lifetime.

On Tuesday, Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo said he may consider asking the HUDCC to explain the PHP5 million it diverted to NCMF.

Panelo warned that if the COA audit report is true, then HUDCC could face raps for technical malversation. (PNA)