

PH improving market access to Russia, envoy says

MANILA -- Philippine Ambassador to Russia Carlos Sorreta said the government is working “aggressively” to improve the Philippines’ market access to Russia, particularly on agricultural products.

“Our primary objective is market access. Russian taste is evolving. They’re willing to try things that are new. So we have, I believe, a good market here for agricultural products,” Sorreta said in a media interview at the Philippine Embassy in Moscow on Wednesday.

As early as the first meeting between President Rodrigo R. Duterte and Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in 2016, Sorreta said the two leaders vowed to announce “good news” that will create more opportunities in the agricultural, fishing, and manufacturing sector.

“There will be agreements that will create demand for our products which means more workers will be employed by the corpo-

rations. Farmers will get higher value for their products. Manufacturers will be creating more jobs and more importantly, the Philippines will be identified as a major player in the agricultural market here, on the food market here -- food and drink,” Sorreta said.

Sorreta said the government would have to overcome challenges such as Russia’s current impression of the Philippines.

“The problem is Russians have a very little knowledge of the

Philippines. What little knowledge they have is stereotypical of the Philippines. So dahil nga (because) we’re identified more with another country where they have problems. So they identify us with that country,” Sorreta said, referring to the United States, the Philippines’ only military ally.

He has assured Russia that the Philippines will not get in between its problems with other countries.

“We’re not taking sides. We just want to do business with you. We want to bring our

peoples closer together and learn more from each other,” Sorreta said.

The envoy said that to promote its products, the Philippines should promote the country first.

“You just can’t promote our fruits without telling the story of the Philippines, of the Filipino people, of the sustainable farming of our long tradition of using healthy and organic inputs in our agriculture and you have to tell the story of a warm and friendly people, of beautiful places for tourists to visit, of a great culture, a great art, and music,” Sorreta said.

“We have to sell the

whole country, our people, our places, our history,” he added.

To create that better knowledge and understanding of the Philippines, Sorreta said the embassy has organized events such as food tasting and cooking demonstrations featuring its agricultural products.

Moreover, he said they are also boosting culture, art, and tourism promotion.

“We’ve been having slight increases over the years in tourism arrival from Russia. And they travel a lot to Southeast Asia. Almost two million go to Southeast Asia. The bulk goes to Thailand, about 1.4 million. We get about

30,000 to 35,000,” Sorreta said.

“So we need to exert more effort. There’s no doubt that Russians travel. They just need to know more about the Philippines and they travel to Southeast Asia,” he added.

Sorreta, meanwhile, said he is confident that Duterte is in a “very great position to speak about the eastern perspective” in his bilateral meeting with Putin.

“We are located in the east. Our neighbors are all east and I think the President will have a very good perspective to share from that very unique point of view,” Sorreta said. (PNA)

PNP to hold summit on gambling debt-linked kidnap cases

MANILA -- To address the spike of gambling-related kidnapping cases in the country, the Philippine National Police-Anti Kidnapping Group (PNP-AGK) is set to conduct a summit on casino-related kidnapping incidents in Quezon City on Friday.

In a statement Thursday, AGK director Col. Jonnel Estomo said the summit, themed “Strategic Partnership and Collaboration Towards a Kidnap-Free Philippines”, will gather officials of various government agencies such as the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (Pagcor), Bureau of Immigration, Airport Police, Department of Justice, Department of Labor and Employment, Anti-Money Laundering Council, local government units, Philippine National Police and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Also participating in the summit are private

sector groups including the Federation of Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Inc. (FFCCII), security heads of casino establishments and foreign embassies and consulates and their police attachés.

PNP chief Gen. Oscar Albayalde will serve as guest of honor and speaker of the event to be held at the Novotel Hotel and Resorts in Cubao from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The summit proper will be focusing on workshops and discussions on the issues and concerns on the rise of casino and Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs)-related Kidnapping Incidents.

“There will be an AGK Summit Template, there new approaches and procedures, specific issues and problems, probable causes, interventions (programs, projects and activities), expected output and timeline on how to address the

problems. And to craft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with different foreign embassies,” Estomo said.

He said the AGK has partnered with Pagcor for the procurement of mobile communication/investigation van and set a summit on casino debt-related kidnappings, aimed at forming an action plan to combat these crimes.

Earlier, AGK spokesperson Lt. Col. Elmer Cereno said the AGK has arrested so far 125 foreigners, mostly Chinese, in connection with gambling-related kidnapping cases in the country.

Cereno said that since 2017, 61 cases of casino-related kidnappings have been recorded. Arrested were 119 Chinese, two Malaysians, four Koreans and seven Filipinos.

The AGK spokesperson said in the 61 cases they recorded, 57 Chinese nationals

were rescued along with four Malaysians, three Koreans, one Vietnamese, Australian, Singaporean and an American.

He said there were 17 cases recorded in 2017, 16 in 2018 and 28 as of September 21, 2019.

Cereno attributed these to the rise in the number of hotel and casino leisure facilities in the Philippines, which eventually attracted many foreigners to the country.

“This invites syndicates with criminal mind, to involve in a wicked business of loan sharking inside the casino premises. Thus, incidents of kidnapping related to gambling debt, arises from 2017 to date,” Cereno said.

He said casino junket operators, mostly Chinese nationals through their agents, would also look for their compatriots abroad, as part of their efforts to target them for their illegal schemes. (PNA)

Gordon dismayed with PDEA chief's ‘softening’ narrative

MANILA -- Senator Richard Gordon on Wednesday said he was very disappointed by the “softening” statements of Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) Director General Aaron Aquino, saying the former police officer’s narration of events was different from what he earlier told the senator in an earlier meeting.

In an interview with reporters, Gordon said Aquino claimed during a meeting with the senator that Philippine National Police (PNP) chief Gen. Oscar Albayalde called him sometime in 2016 about the dismissal case filed against 13 Pampanga police officers involved in an irregular anti-drug operation in 2013.

“I am very disappointed. Nung kausap ko siya, sabi niya: Ito ang nangyari, sir, kinausap ako (When I talked to him, he said: this is what happened, sir, he talked to me),” Gordon said, citing his conversation with Aquino referring to Albayalde.

When asked if Aquino told them that Albayalde requested the dismissal order not to be implemented, Gordon answered in the affir-

mative, adding that Senator Franklin Drilon was also present during the meeting that happened Sunday afternoon.

However, in an interview with reporters Tuesday, Aquino said Albayalde did not intervene in the dismissal order and only asked for a review and status of the operation, echoing Albayalde’s defense during the Senate hearing.

“Mali Yun. ‘Yun ang sinasabi ko na lumabot (That’s wrong. That’s why I said he softened his statement),” Gordon said.

The chair of the Blue-Ribbon Committee said he was even more dismayed with Aquino’s excuse when he talked with the former police officer after the hearing.

“Nung kausapin ko siya kahapon, I am very disappointed. Sabi niya: ‘nalito ako.’ You’re a general, hindi ka pwede malito. Pati si General Magalong was very disappointed,” Gordon said.

(When I talked to Aquino yesterday, I am very disappointed. He said: ‘I got confused.’ You’re a general, you should not get confused. Even General Magalong was very dis-

appointed.)

When asked of the possible reason why Aquino heeded the alleged request, the senator pointed to “peer pressure.”

“Pag may peer pressure ka na, may class pressure, mahihirapan ka na. D’yan mo makikita kung tunay kang lalaki,” Gordon noted.

(When there is peer pressure, there is class pressure, you will find it difficult. That’s when you will know if you are a real man.)

Drilon corroborated Gordon’s claim on Aquino’s sudden change of tone.

The Senate Minority Leader confirmed that he was invited to a meeting by Gordon to listen to Aquino, saying though he “could not recall the exact words.”

“Pero ang nakiusap na huwag muna i-implement (But the request to not yet implement) is something in substance that I remember to be the narration of General Aquino of his telephone conversation with General Abayalde,” Drilon said in a separate interview.

He also pointed to the seeming “hesitancy” of Aquino during Tuesday’s public hearing.