

PDEA opens 'evidence room' to disprove drug recycling claims

MANILA -- The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) on Thursday opened to media its newly-improved Evidence Room where seized dangerous drugs are being kept.

"In the past, only a limited number of people are allowed entry inside the Evidence Room. But now, we are opening it to the media as a testament of transparency and accountability in handling illegal drugs confiscated during anti-drug operations," PDEA Director General Aaron N. Aquino said adding this is the first time in PDEA's history that the depository of seized drugs will be exposed to the public.

"From the moment the public first laid eyes on the Evidence Room, PDEA hopes to foster credibility, improve public trust, and build transparent and accountable government for the whole nation to see," the PDEA chief said.

The laboratory and storage facilities for drug evidence are housed in a new three-story building of the PDEA Laboratory Service, considered to be the country's premier drug forensic center, at the agency's national headquarters in Quezon City.

The PHP25 million-building was inaugurated last June 1, 2018.

The new PDEA evidence room has an upgraded security system, making it inaccessible to unauthorized personnel.

Closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras were installed for 24/7 monitoring which leaves no blind areas on the premises. ABC-class fire extinguishers were placed as part of the fire exhaustion system. Metal grills and double doors were also installed around the facility.

The doors of the evidence room are secured with three sets of locks under the custody of three authorized key holders, which makes the absence of one key holder makes the entry to the room impossible.

Air conditioning units, exhaust fans, and dehumidifiers were also installed for proper ventilation inside the facility in order to preserve physical evidence.

A biometrics machine is also installed outside the evidence room to control access to the facility. The procurement of 10 new steel racks is also in the offing to enhance the storage of evidence.

PDEA has the sole authority to take charge and have custody of seized drug evidence under Section 21 (Custody and Disposition of Confiscated, Seized, and/or Surrendered Dangerous Drugs, Plant Sources of Dangerous Drugs, Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals, Instruments/ Paraphernalia and/or Laboratory Equipment) of Republic Act 9165, or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002, as amended by Republic Act 10640.

Restriction in the accessibility of the storage facility is one of the controls instilled by PDEA to assure the security of drug evidence and avoid legal implications in the future.

However, a three-man audit team from the Commission on Audit (COA) was granted access to the new PDEA Evidence Room on May 15, 2018. The entry to the restricted area is PDEA's way of showing transparency with regard to safekeeping of drug evidence and let COA do its functions.

Based on the 2018 audit report of the Com-

mission on Audit (COA) on PDEA's safekeeping, monitoring, and disposition of seized/confiscated dangerous drugs in its custody, the agency was commended for improving its evidence room by fully implementing all the recommendations of the audit team in the previous year.

The forensic laboratories of PDEA in the regions are now using an automated inventory system through tagging and barcoding for speedy and accurate documentation and accounting of drug evidence.

Known as PDEA Evidence Inventory and Information System, or PEIIS, the system provides additional security features, achieves organized data collection while preserving the integrity and evidentiary value of seized drug evidence received in its custody during legitimate anti-drug operations.

The PDEA Laboratory Service, the premier drug forensic center located in the agency's national headquarters, is using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), a technology that uses radio waves to track and monitor the movement of the evidence.

"This makes PDEA the first government agency to pioneer the use of these technologically-advanced drug inventory systems in the country," Aquino said.

The PEIIS and RFID, Aquino said, will address questions on the integrity of drug evidence, issues on recycling, and the manner of safekeeping, quantity and destruction of evidence.

"This is part of our continuing capability enhancement program for safekeeping of drug evidence. As the lead

House may pass budget on final reading Friday: Ungab

MANILA -- The House of Representatives may pass the proposed PHP4.1 trillion national budget for 2020 on second and third reading on Friday, House Committee on Appropriations chair and Davao City 3rd District Rep. Isidro Ungab said Thursday.

Ungab said this is possible after President Rodrigo Duterte certified the General Appropriations Bill (GAB) as urgent.

The House leader said the passage of the budget bill on time is "of immense importance in helping boost the economy."

"Thus, it is possible that the GAB will be passed this Friday, since it was already certified as urgent," Ungab said.

Prior to Duterte's certification, the House was planning to approve the 2020 budget on second reading on Friday, and approve it on third reading before Congress goes on recess on October 4.

House Majority Leader Martin Romualdez assured that the 2020 budget will be a reflection not only of the President's vision but also of the people's will.

"As envisioned by the President, the 2020 national budget seeks to move the nation forward towards its aspired-for destination: a more peaceful and progressive Philippines," he said in a statement.

"We, in Congress, support the initiatives of the Duterte administration to empower the poor

through increased subsidies and grants aimed at ending the inter-generational cycle of poverty in the country," Romualdez said.

Malacañang said Duterte certified next year's proposed national budget as urgent to avoid a repeat of the delay in the passage of the PHP3.7 trillion 2019 budget, which slowed down the country's economic growth in the first half of the year.

Data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) Thursday showed that this year's second quarter gross domestic product (GDP) growth slowed to a more than four-year low of 5.5 percent as the government was forced to under-spend by at least PHP1 billion a day on public goods and services due to the late approval of the 2019 budget.

Even industries were not spared from the impact of the delayed budget, it added.

The PSA said earnings by major industries in the second quarter of 2019 slowed to 6.5 percent alongside a weaker growth in the economy still brought about by the budget delay. This was below the 9.6 percent expansion for the same period in 2018.

Employment also took a hit, with construction companies shedding jobs by 2 percent as public construction projects came to a stop due to the election ban for mid-term polls, and the lack of budget to roll out the government's infrastructure projects. (PNA)

DOH confirms polio outbreak, intensifies vaccination campaign

MANILA -- Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said Thursday his department would intensify its vaccination campaign against polio after confirming the re-emergence of the disease in the country.

"Polio is re-emerging in the country, 19 years after the Philippines has been declared polio-free by the World Health Organization in 2000. Polio is an infectious disease, which spreads rapidly, causing paralysis and on rare occasions can be fatal," Duque said.

agency in the country's anti-drug campaign, the integrity of PDEA in safekeeping of all pieces of drug evidence is of paramount importance," Aquino said.

As of August 31, 2019, a total of 3.6 tons, or PHP22 billion worth of dangerous drugs are presently stored inside the PDEA Evidence Room. (PNA)

He reported one confirmed case of polio, a three-year-old from Lanao del Sur, and a suspected case of acute flaccid paralysis, which is awaiting confirmation.

He added that the polio virus has been detected in samples taken from sewage in Manila and waterways in Davao as part of the regular environmental surveillance.

The samples were tested by the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine and were verified by the Japan National Institute for Infectious Diseases and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"A single confirmed polio case of a vaccine-derived polio virus type or two positive environmental samples that are genetically linked and isolated in two different locations is considered an epidemic in

a polio-free country," Duque said.

In response, he said, the Department of Health (DOH) is in close coordination with the local government units, national agencies, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in implementing a series of synchronized oral polio vaccinations to protect every child under five years old.

"The polio vaccinations in the National Capital Region, Davao City and Lanao del Sur will commence on October 14. We're just preparing all the logistics and vaccines supply," he added.

WHO Country Representative Rabindra Abeyasinghe said the organization stands with the DOH in responding to the polio outbreak.

"We, together with

the UNICEF, have fully prepared to help the Philippine government to strengthen the surveillance and swiftly respond to the situation," Abeyasinghe added.

Meanwhile, UNICEF Country Representative Oyon Dendevnorov said that vaccination is the only and best protection against polio among young children.

"As long as one single child remains infected, children across the country, and even beyond, are at risk of contracting polio," Dendevnorov said.

Duque reminded the public that good personal hygiene is another effective way to combat polio apart from immunization.

"Wash your hands regularly, and handwashing for about 20 seconds. Use toilets, drink safe water, and cook your food thoroughly," he added. (PNA)