**Filipino consumers third most optimistic in Asia-Pacific region**

Increasing economic activity in the Philippines has made Filipinos third among the most-optimistic consumers in 14 Asia-Pacific economies, according to a survey carried out by a US-based think tank

The Conference Board. India and China took the first and second rankings respectively, the report pointed out.

The survey, which was based on results of the latest Global Consumer Confidence Survey, witnessed the Philippines scoring 119 on the consumer confidence index (CCI) during the first three months of the year. However, this was four points lower than country’s CCI score of 123 in the fourth quarter last year.

Globally, the Philippines ranked fifth out of 65 economies after India, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United Arab Emirates.

A CCI reading of above 100 means there are more optimistic than pessimistic consumers. The country was among the 20 out of 65 economies posting a CCI score above 100 for the quarter.

“Asia-Pacific had one of the highest levels of consumer confidence. Indeed, effective containment measures, fiscal stimulus packages in both advanced and emerging economies in the region, plus a comparative advantage in exports of goods and technology, helped maintain household finances, bolstered job prospects, and boosted confidence,” the report stated.

About 59% of Filipinos improved their sentiment on personal finances in the first quarter from 54% previously -- higher than the 40% across Asia-Pacific from 26% in the fourth quarter. However, Asia-Pacific households were more concerned about their health, and less about the economy and job security, the report said.

Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) Lead Economist Emilio S. Neri, Jr. said the country’s labor activity was “constrained by the drop in their disposable incomes” due to the implementation of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) — the strictest form of lockdown — in late March which, in turn, caused the country’s CCI score to drop.

“Aside from the ECQ, rising inflation may have eroded consumer confidence as meat and vegetables took a bigger share of the consumer’s basket of goods and services. Meat was easily 20% more expensive in [first quarter of 2020] than the same time last year after all,” Neri stated.

**Filipino construction workers In Micronesia face repatriation**

Filipinos working in the Federated States of Micronesia on CW-1 permits are likely be repatriated to the Philippines in July, according to the 20th status report of Imperial Pacific International LLC (IPI) to the federal court.

The IPI is required to file weekly status updates regarding its progress in purging contempt and paying for the remaining amounts in the initial consent judgement as part of the amended judgment between IPI and the US Department of Labor on March 29, 2021.

While the casino investor was able to repatriate six Malaysian CWs during the reporting period, two others will be repatriated in August and the Philippine CWs are likely to be repatriated in July, attorney Michael Dotts told the court while pointing out that no payroll was due for distribution during this reporting period though IPI’s next payroll is to be distributed on June 4 (Payroll 12).

Dotts also said that no settlement payments were due during the reporting period, and that IPI’s next settlement payment is due on June 1. Regarding housing and food for its remaining employees, IPI is maintaining power and water wherever some CW employees remain in residence, he said, adding that construction work at the Imperial Pacific Resort in Garapan remains suspended as ordered by the court, though IPI expects to complete its review of USDOL’s analysis of the payments received by employees by the end of this week.

IPI was ordered to make incremental monthly payments of $164,270.08 from April 1, 2021 to Dec. 1, 2021 for a total amount of $1,478,430.72, according to the modified consent judgement.

**Filipino-American Mark Climaco remains unbeaten in MMA**

Filipino-American Mark Climaco continued to make his rise to the top in the American MMA scene after scoring another win recently, where he defeated Rodney Kealohi by unanimous decision in the Legacy Fighting Alliance 108: Fremd vs. Rodriguez on May 21 at the Sanford Pentagon in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, USA.

With this win, Climaco remains unbeaten with a record of 6-0, while Kealohi has dropped to 5-2.

The 23-year-old Climaco, who has Cebuano roots, had displayed his superior wrestling and ground game skills in dominating Kealohi during the entire fight that went the Filipino fighter’s way. Climaco even tried a couple of submission attempts including like that rear-naked choke in the second round, but Kealohi somehow survived the attempts but lost the bout.

Kealohi finished the strong with a kimura attempt and an elbow just at the end of the fight, but the effort turned out to be too late and not enough to beat Climaco, who was declared winner after getting the nod from all three judges with scores of 30-27, 30-27 and 29-28.

Climaco trains at the American Kickboxing Academy, which has produced top fighters like Khabib Nurmagomedov, Daniel Cormier, Cain Velazquez, Luke Rockhold and Jon Fitch.

**TESDA helps over 1,000 OFWs learn, polish new skills**

The Philippine Technical Education and Skills Development-Cordillera Administrative Region (TESDA-CAR) has successfully trained 1,112 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and their family members with new skills.

These skills were provided to recipients under various scholarships of the government as assistance to the sector, Dante Navarro, regional director of TESDA-CAR, said recently while noting that for OFWs, the agency helps in the assessment of skills for the examination of national certification, which qualifies them for overseas placement jobs.

The OFWs are assessed and issued a national certification so that they will return abroad with the required qualification and document, while their families are also entitled to receive scholarships from the government, he said.

Navarro said that in 2017, 47 OFWs or their families had availed of the assessment, 229 in 2018, 394 in 2019, and 346 in 2020, besides January to April 2021 witnessing 96 others being assisted by TESDA. Several OFWs -- repatriated to the country when Covid-19 struck -- also availed of the different skills training to acquire new skills.

Noting that having additional skills ensured more possibilities for a person to be hired, the sector can avail of available training to upgrade their knowledge or get a new one since TESDA had several programs that fitted the needs of the returning overseas Filipinos.

While it has been mandated to provide assistance to fellow Filipinos -- especially the OFWs, statistics showed that TESDA-CAR has a budget of PHP185 million for the scholarship program which includes Training for work scholarship program (TWSP), Special training for employment program (STEP), Rice extension service program (RESP), Universal access to quality tertiary education act ((UAQTEA) and Private education student fund assistance (PESFA).

**91 countries face new strains as India bans vaccine export: WHO**

As many as 91 countries are likely to be affected by India’s decision to ban exports of vaccines like Serum Institute of India's (SII) products, including the AstraZeneca vaccine (Covishield) and the forthcoming Novavax, reports the World Health Organization (WHO).

Inadequate vaccine stocks in these countries including Africa means they will be extremely susceptible to new strains of Covid, including B.1.617.2, first discovered in India, who stated.

"Around 91 countries are impacted by the shortage of supplies, particularly since the AstraZeneca parent company has not been able to compensate for the doses which have not come from Serum," Dr Soumya Swaminathan, WHO Chief Scientist, told a television channel in India.

"While it is not just B.1.617.2, but also other variants that are likely to emerge in other countries and spread around the world, we know that these variants spread very quickly even before they are recognized. The same thing happened with the 117 [variant], that is now dominant," she said.

The Serum Institute of India, which had a legally-binding agreement signed with AstraZeneca last year, had been expected to supply a billion doses for low-and middle-income countries, including a commitment to provide 400 million doses in 2020 alone. These were being delivered through Gavi, the international vaccine alliance, of which the WHO is a key member, Swaminathan said. .

"Most of the African countries had vaccinated less than 0.5 per cent of their populations – which however did not include their healthcare workers," she said, adding, “If this inequitable distribution of available vaccines continues, then only some countries will be going back to some degree of normalcy in their life -- while other countries will be hit very hard continuously by subsequent Covid-19 waves."

**NASA’s Curiosity rover spots earth-like clouds on Red Planet**

NASA’s Mars Curiosity rover has managed to capture “shining” clouds on the Red Planet. These clouds had arrived earlier and formed higher than expected in the atmosphere on Mars, which is usually thin, dry, and having rare cloudy days, NASA stated.

The NASA scientists noted that these clouds are typically found at the planet’s equator at the coldest time of year, when Mars is the farthest from the Sun in its oval-shaped orbit. However, the scientists now noticed clouds forming over NASA’s Curiosity rover earlier than expected --one full Martian year ago -- which is two Earth years.

In late January, this year, the team started documenting these “early" clouds with images displaying wispy puffs filled with ice crystals that scattered light from the setting Sun, including some of it shimmering with colour.

The rover’s Mast Camera, or Mastcam, clicked colour images of the iridescent, “mother of pearl" clouds on March 5, 2021, which is the 3,048th Martian day -- or sol -- of the mission.

“If you see a cloud with a shimmery pastel set of colors in it, that’s because the cloud particles are all nearly identical in size and is usually happening just after the clouds have formed and have all grown at the same rate," said Mark Lemmon, an atmospheric scientist with the Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

Noting that these clouds are among the most colorful things on the Red Planet, Lemmon said that anyone skygazing next to Curiosity could see the faint colours with the naked eye. “I always marvel at the colours that show up: reds and greens and blues and purples. It’s really cool to see something shining with lots of colour on Mars," he said.

On March 31, the 3,075th sol or Martian day of the mission, the navigation cameras on the mast of Curiosity also captured black-and-white images highlighting rippling structures of the clouds, just after sunset.

“Viewed just after sunset, their ice crystals catch the fading light while causing them to appear to glow against the darkening sky. These twilight clouds, also known as “noctilucent" (Latin for “night shining") clouds, grow brighter as they fill with crystals, then darken after the Sun’s position in the sky drops below their altitude,” NASA stated, while adding that besides being spectacular displays, such images helped scientists understand how clouds form on Mars and why these recent ones are different.