

House okays P1.8-T budget

Written by Administrator
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Lawmakers flash a thumbs-up sign after passing the proposed P1.8-trillion national budget for 2012 on second reading before midnight last Friday.

MANILA — The House of Representatives passed on second reading before midnight last Friday the proposed P1.8-trillion national budget for 2012 after two weeks of intense debates that revolved around the controversial lump sum funds put in by the Aquino Administration and the lack of funding for government hospitals.

Malacañang praised the House leadership for its prompt action on the budget program.

Speaker Feliciano Belmonte Jr. banged the gavel at 11:29 p.m. last Friday to signal the approval of the 2012 General Appropriations Bill (GAB) after an “ayes and nays” voting, with House Minority Leader and Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman and Maguindanao Rep. Simeon

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Datumanong among the last to interpellate on the floor.

Upon the motion of House Majority Leader and Mandaluyong Rep. Neptali Gonzales II, Belmonte formed a small committee of six lawmakers to work on the amendments submitted by their colleagues.

He said for the second year, the House fulfilled its constitutional duty when it approved in record time the proposed national budget for next year.

“We crafted this budget fully aware of both the potential and the limits of our present national economy. Our country obtained credit upgrades from international rating agencies, sharp improvements in its international competitiveness ratings, and received much-needed boost in foreign direct investments,” Belmonte said.

“The great optimism derived from these encouraging developments, is however, tempered by the realities facing the global economy — oil price spikes and the socio-political upheavals in foreign economies that have become host to many of our workers, to name a few. Even the Greek meltdown matters,” he said.

He said P1.8-trillion proposed outlay was crafted by legislators “with great pragmatism, and with as much foresight as is humanly possible.”

“More importantly, it is a budget aligned to the overarching objectives of our people — drastic reduction in poverty and the empowerment of the disadvantaged; economic growth; and the fight against corruption, to name a few,” the Speaker said.

He thanked House members for their dedication and hard work in approving the GAB.

“The comprehensive and sometimes heated debates only highlighted our vibrant representative democracy,” Belmonte said.

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“The House is just true to its constitutional mandate of exercising its power over the purse,” he added.

Cavite Rep. Joseph Emilio Abaya, chairman of the House committee on appropriations, said the chamber aimed to have the GAB approved on third and final reading on Oct. 14.

While proposed budgets for most departments and agencies breezed through the floor, at least three lump sum appropriations were strongly opposed by some lawmakers, namely the P101-billion Miscellaneous Personnel Benefits Fund (MPBF), the P329-million PAMANA project of the Office of the Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process (OPAPP), and the P39.4-billion conditional cash transfer program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

Lagman and Senior Deputy Minority Leader Danilo Suarez warned that the appropriation for MPBF, comprising funding for unfilled positions in the judiciary and independent constitutional bodies pooled and placed under the authority of President Benigno Aquino III, would violate the fiscal autonomy of these sectors.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile and Sen. Joker Arroyo first raised the alarm on the creation of the MPBF, saying it would force the judiciary and independent constitutional bodies to beg for funds.

Bayan Muna party-list Rep. Neri Colmenares said the MPBF would become Mr. Aquino’s new source of pork barrel if unreleased.

“When it is not released to the agencies, it becomes savings. The moment it becomes savings then it is up to the President to spend it,” Colmenares said.

He also warned that pork barrel funds of Mr. Aquino for 2012 would be padded by an additional P161 billion, listed as “unprogrammed funds” in the GAB.

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Some House members also opposed the PAMANA and the CCT, but backchannel talks ensured that the controversial allocations would not be deleted from the GAB.

The PAMANA is intended for conflict areas.

Suarez said the questionable appropriations would likely be protested before the Supreme Court.

Lawmakers also lamented that Budget Secretary Florencio Abad has drastically cut for the second year in a row, allocations for all 112 state colleges and universities and 67 government hospitals.

Bayan Muna Rep. Teodoro Casiño said Abad reduced to zero the P50-million appropriation for subsidies for poor patients confined in government specialty hospitals.

The 10 agencies with the highest budget for 2012 are the Department of Education with P238.8 billion; Department of Public Works and Highways (P125.5 billion); Department of National Defense (P107.9 billion); Department of Interior and Local Government (P101.4 billion); Department of Agriculture (P54 billion); DSWD (P49.4 billion); Department of Health (P44.4 billion); Department of Transportation and Communications (P34.6 billion); Department of Agrarian Reform (P18.3 billion); and the judiciary (P15.7 billion).

Abad described the 2012 budget as “results-focused” and designed to fulfill the President’s “social contract” with the Filipinos, namely anti-corruption, promotion of good governance, poverty reduction and empowerment of the poor, inclusive economic growth, just and lasting peace and the rule of law, and environment protection.

“To fortify the fight against corruption, we have taken pains to ensure that public funds will not be diverted for unauthorized uses. As a first step, we approved the breakdown of lump-sum funds totaling more than P150 billion and their allocation to regional and sub-regional offices.

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This will ensure accountability in their use,” Belmonte said.

“We are happy that the (proposed) budget was passed on second reading,” deputy presidential spokesperson Abigail Valte said over government-run dzRB radio.

“I was also monitoring that and we are happy that it was (adopted) on time. The congressmen committed to pass the (budget). It was good that like what happened last year, our budget was also passed on time and was not re-enacted,” Valte said.