

EDITORIAL

## Rip-off?

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On March 30, the Department of Health (DOH), which was then being roundly criticized for its flaccid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, announced that it had bought from China a million sets of personal protective equipment (PPE) for P1.8 billion, or P1,800 for each set.

Sen. Grace Poe questioned the purchase, noting that there were other PPE sold at between just P400 and P1,000 each, and that the public health emergency and the urgent need to acquire such supplies for exposed health workers should not be an excuse to shirk the duty to exercise prudence.

“Confronting an extraordinary public health crisis requires prompt response, but in doing so, let us not forget the need for the judicious use of fund releases,” said Poe, chair of the Senate public services committee.

Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire justified the P1.8-billion tag by saying that not all PPE are created equal. What the DOH bought, she explained, was the “most complete” set with an N95 mask, coveralls, gloves, head cover, shoe cover, goggles, surgical mask, and surgical gown.

Before this, the office of Vice President Leni Robredo had managed to buy from a local manufacturer PPE sets at about P400 each, for donation to hospitals at the COVID-19 frontlines.

What could well have changed in 40 days, such that the price of PPE from China would skyrocket by some 270 percent?

On May 9, National Task Force COVID-19 chief implementer Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. announced in Davao that the government intends to buy three million PPE sets for P20 billion.

The procurement, he added, will be from June to August: “We are stockpiling on PPE sets because this COVID-19 might last until 2021.”

Fine — but break that price down and it translates to a staggering P6,667 each per PPE. Now, if what the DOH bought for P1,800 each in March was already the “most complete” set, according to Vergeire, what other add-ons and accoutrements could the new P6,667 PPE possibly boast of to justify its astronomical price?

Galvez, and whoever vetted and approved this purchase, should be made to explain: Why P20 billion for three million PPE sets? Is the country being ripped off here, at a time when the pandemic has laid ruin to the economy

and left millions of Filipinos starving and desperate?

Then there's the other question about the quality of the PPEs and other medical equipment sourced from China. Health experts in India, for example, rejected the use of some 500,000 COVID-19 test kits bought from Chinese companies due to "performance issues" that made them unreliable for identifying individuals who may have contracted COVID-19.

India also rejected 50,000 donated PPE kits for failing to meet safety tests. British doctors raised similar grave concerns about 250 ventilators purchased from China, saying the "variable and unreliable" equipment posed "significant patient harm, including death." Canada's public health authority, meanwhile, said around one million KN95 respirators from China, from where it sources around 70 percent of its PPE imports, failed to meet standards for use by its frontline health professionals.

Hardly anyone noticed, but on April 8, the Makati Medical Center said the same thing: "We were able to source and receive donations of China-made KN95 masks as possible alternative to the 3M N95s. Unfortunately, some of the delivered KN95s must have been manufactured by unscrupulous companies as the integrity/quality of the masks is not consistent with their documented specification when tests were run..." Many of these donated masks will no longer be used, said MMC, as "We cannot take the risk and compromise the safety of our health care workforce."

The Philippines received the first batch of 15,000 PPE from China on March 31. Were they subjected to rigorous inspection and quality assurance before distribution? Where is the report on such inspection? Note that in late March, Vergeire had admitted that the first test kits sent by China showed only 40-percent accuracy — but then the DOH rebutted its very own spokesperson and issued an apology after the Chinese embassy took strong exception to Vergeire's claim, warning that it could lead to "public misunderstanding." Nothing more was heard after that about the efficacy of the rest of the medical supplies the Philippine government had obtained from China. The World Health Organization has raised concern over the unusually high number of health care workers in the Philippines succumbing to COVID-19, hence the safety and reliability of medical equipment being bought with tax money assumes critical importance. Now, unless Galvez et al. come up with an adequate explanation for their P20-billion PPE purchase, it appears an even more basic issue may be bedeviling the procurement of COVID-19 supplies: Is the people's money being used properly, judiciously?