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'Printer can handle e-passport demand'

By CHRISTINA MENDEZ

A Palace executive assured the public yesterday that the government can provide enough e-passports to cater to the increasing demand, owing to many Filipinos who are now able to go abroad due to cheaper plane fares and affordable travel packages.

Michael Dalumpines, chairman and acting chief executive officer of the APO Production Unit Inc., gave the assurance that the government capacity is even beyond the 28,000 passport booklets being ordered by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA).

Dalumpines said the APO has been up to date in the printing of passports. He added the lack of proper DFA personnel to handle the spike in the number of passport applications is now being addressed by the DFA.

"There is currently no backlog in e-passport processing. What is perceived as backlog may be the difficulty in securing an appointment, which the DFA is working on as the appointment system is the DFA's responsibility," Dalumpines told **The STAR**.

He added that APO's personalization capacity is 28,000 per day while the previous contractor could only print 8,000 a day.

In the same interview, Dalumpines belied the claim of former foreign affairs secretary Perfecto Yasay that the delays in the issuance of new e-passports can be attributed to the government's joint venture agreement with a private contractor that was entered into during the previous Aquino administration.

Dalumpines defended the transfer of the procurement system from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) to the APO Production Unit.

Dalumpines, who was appointed last year by President Duterte, said the transfer of printing to APO was necessary because the old e-passport system had various technical issues.

"In fact, the backlog then of the old system was 230,000 and APO was able to help the DFA reduce this less than 5,000 when we transferred the personalization

printing to APO Lima Plant in Batangas," he added.

Yasay testified during the joint investigation last Tuesday by the House committees on foreign affairs and good government and public accountability on the passport issues, wherein he attributed this to the backlog in the online appointment process for applications and renewals.

The APO official took exception to Yasay's claim that the actual printer and supplier of passports cannot be held answerable by either the DFA or APO for any problem of breach of contract that may arise.

Dalumpines said everything is above board regarding APO's joint venture agreement with United Graphics Expression Inc., which provided the government with the high-tech printing machines from France.

"The contract is not disadvantageous to the government, contrary to secretary Yasay's claims. It was through the approval process in the accordance with law and was reviewed by the appropriate agencies," he said.

APO is a state owned firm under the operational control and supervision of Presidential Communications Operations Office.

The memorandum of agreement that granted APO the authority to print the electronic passport through a new integrated system was signed Oct. 5, 2015 during the Aquino administration.

The officials involved were former foreign secretary Albert del Rosario and then PCOO secretary Herminio Coloma.

APO is described in the agreement as the only recognized government printers that expressed willingness to print the e-passport. The other two recognized government printers are the National Printing Office and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas.

Dalumpines added that under the contract, DFA may impose penalties or terminate the agreement with APO if it is not satisfied with the services being rendered in connection with the e-passport.

He added Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea has conducted an investigation into some of the concerns and that APO is awaiting the findings of the investigation.

*DEPT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS