

# 'Government failed to cushion TRAIN's effects on poor Pinoys'

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Senators hit yesterday concerned government agencies for their failure to implement the unconditional cash transfer (UCT) program to help the poor cope with price increases due to the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law.

Sens. Sherwin Gatchalian, chairman of the Senate committee on economic affairs, and Paolo Benigno Aquino IV reprimanded officials during a hearing of the panel on Wednesday on the impact of the TRAIN on inflation.

The P24-billion UCT program gives P200 per month for 10 million families. The Department of Finance, the senators said, promised the UCT would be fully implemented shortly after the TRAIN Law took effect last January.

Gatchalian said senators approved the TRAIN on the condition, among others, that the executive branch would immediately implement the UCT.

"My point here is we make decisions based on the information and assurance you are giving us. If you can't keep your word, then we may have had arrived at a different decision. Now, you are telling us that you are to complete this by September?" the senator said during the hearing.

However, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) said at the hearing that the government has only been able to distribute aid to around four million households.

The new target is to complete disbursement to the remaining six million households by the end of September.

Noel Macalalad, DSWD Assistant Secretary for policy and plans, told the hearing that the agency is looking for ways to cut the delays in the payouts, given the physical constraints of distributing the cash to 10 million families nationwide.

"One, for example, there are areas that are hard to reach, and transporting money – physical money – to the nearest Landbank branch takes a lot of logistics planning. And this is something that we need to consider," Macalalad said.

The UCT is broken down to three beneficiary programs: the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4.4 million households), the Social Pension Program (three million households) and Listahan Program (2.6 million households).

Aquino and Gatchalian suggested the subsidies be doubled as P200 is not enough to cover the increases in the prices of basic goods.

Aquino filed yesterday a bill allowing the suspension of excise taxes on petroleum products under the TRAIN should the quarterly average inflation exceed official targets.

Under Senate Bill 1798, the government can re-impose the excise tax on fuel if the average inflation rate stabilizes and falls below the target.

"With so many Filipinos living on the fringes, the government needs to play an active role in managing inflation and ensure that our countrymen can survive the rise in prices," Aquino said

in his bill.

Inflation shot up to 4.5 percent this April, more than the two to four percent annual target of the government.