Pangilinan, Belmonte seek P6B in 2019 Budget to Cover riCe farmers' losses

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SEN. Francis Pangilinan has filed a bill seeking to augment the 2019 budget with P6 billion to immediately provide unconditional cash transfer to rice farmers.

Senate Bill 1191 proposes a P6billion supplemental budget for direct cash transfers to vulnerable rice farmers who are planting 1 hectare or less, "as compensation for the reduction or loss of farm income arising from the influx of imported rice."

At the House of Representatives, Quezon City Rep. Christopher "Kit" Belmonte, also on Tuesday afternoon, filed House Bill 5629 as a counterpart measure, saying that the cash assistance will encourage rice farmers to continue farming.

Pangilinan is Liberal Party president while Belmonte is the party's secretary-general.

"Ang buhay at kabuhayan ng ating mga magpapalay ay nasa panganib, at dapat nating tratuhin ito bilang isang emergency situation na nangangailangan ng agarang atensyon [The life and livelihood of our farmers are in peril, and we should treat this as an emergency situation that needed immediate attention]" Pangilinan said.

"The cash transfer will give them a lifeline to continue farming while we try our best to fix the law," Pangilinan added, referring to Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Act.

The law imposes a minimum 35-percent tariff on rice imports in lieu of quantitative restrictions (QRs).

The liberalization of rice imports, while intended to give the country a steady supply, has led to declining palay farm-gate prices in many rice-producing areas.

Eight months since the passage of the law, farm-gate prices of palay have plunged to as low as P7 to P10 per kilo in some provinces, while the price of rice dropped by 2.9 percent, and the price of palay by 17.48 percent.

The drop in farm-gate price of palay has resulted in huge income losses for rice farmers and the industry, now estimated around P60 billion, and projected to double by year-end.

Pangilinan said releases from the proposed supplemental fund will be made by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) directly to the Department of Agriculture (DA), which shall make available the fund to the farmers.

The fund will be effective until December 31, 2020.

Earlier, both the Senate and the House approved on third and final reading their respective bills extending the validity of the 2019 budget until December 31, 2020.

This would allow agencies to spend funds for capital outlays and maintenance, and other operating expenses in the 2019 budget until next year.

According to Pangilinan's bill, the DBM will submit to Congress and the Commission on Audit quarterly report on the utilization of funds.

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