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The best and the brightest

by Dennis Posadas

Some of the best and the brightest Filipinos in science and technology (S&T) were at the Philippine American Academy of Science and Engineering (PAASE) at the Century Park Sheraton last Feb. 15-16. Sponsored by De La Salle University (DLSU) this year, PAASE has been in existence since 1981. This year, the conference was organized under the able stewardship of 2007 PAASE President Alvin Culaba, of De La Salle University.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was the guest of honor, announcing several new programs for Philippine S&T, including: 1) a Presidential Committee for R&D; 2) a P500-million Science Center complex at the University of the Philippines; 3) four technology incubators.

PAASE is a professional association of Filipino American scientists and engineers, many of whom are at the forefront of scientific research in the United States. Founded by Drs. Severino Koh, Pat Mangonon, Jr., Edgar Buyco, Carlos Melendres, it started with 27 founding members in 1980, and has grown to 170 members as of 2006. Working closely with local S&T groups like the Department of Science and Technology (DoST), local universities like the University of the Philippines (UP), Ateneo, De La Salle, its principal objective is to use the expertise and professional stature of its members to help improve the state of S&T in the Philippines.

This year, representatives from local universities like UP, Ateneo, De La Salle, Mapua Institute of Technology, University of Sto. Tomas (UST), Angeles University Foundation (AUF), Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT), Technological Institute of the Philippines (TIP), Mariano Marcos State University, Central Luzon State University (CLSU), UP Los Baños (UPLB), DoST, UP Visayas, Central Mindanao University as well as many other state, national and private institutions presented their research papers.

Distinguished lectures were given by: Baldomero Olivera, PhD (Professor, University of Utah) on drug discovery from our biodiverse resources; Sam Bernal, PhD (UCLA School of Medicine) on stem cells and regenerative medicine; Leah Tolosa, PhD (University of Maryland) on sensor technology; Jong Hwan Kim, PhD (KAIST) on a road map to becoming a first-class S&T nation; Benito Lumen, PhD (UC Berkeley) on cancer preventive peptides; Michael Purvis, PhD (University of Portsmouth) on energy indicators and improvement; Josefino Comiso, PhD (NASA Goddard Flight Center) on satellite sensor imaging for the environment; Greg Tangonan, PhD (Ateneo de Manila) on PAASE's role in closing the innovation gap; Crisostomo Garcia, PhD (University of Chicago) on policy and economics; Fabian Dayrit, PhD (Ateneo de Manila) on the Advanced Science and Engineering Program.

Ben de Lumen of UC Berkeley said that "science and technology is the way to go, in terms of moving the economy of the Philippines forward." Mr. Lumen hopes that more resources will be made available to S&T. He likes the Korean model, which encourages private sector participation in R&D. "We have to do really good science, and that's the way you know you are competitive," he added. Mr. Lumen said that international publications and international patents are the metrics for determining whether we are doing "good science."

Science and Technology Undersecretary Fortunato dela Peña said that PAASE can "suggest areas for R&D, also areas where we can focus human resource development." He said this can help bolster initiatives, especially since US-based PAASE members "have been collaborating with our local scientists with very good results." He hopes that this model of US-Philippines S&T collaboration can be expanded. Mr. dela Peña believes that Congress is already open to these improvements, and he hopes that the goal of P10 billion for S&T in the next five years will be achievable. He said that our current spending on S&T "is only 0.3% of GDP."

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Manuel Velasquez, MD of the George Washington University said that many of the PAASE members "took their education here, and in that case we were very, very fortunate." Mr. Velasquez said that the budget for S&T should definitely increase. He said that technology is constantly changing. "We are already behind," he said, "and if we don't do this, we will even be more behind." Mr. Velasquez added that the reason he is here, "is to help instill in the young the love for science and technology," instead of automatically taking other courses. He said the compensation for Philippine sciences is extremely low and needs to be addressed. The role of PAASE, is that it is one unified group with one mission. Mr. Velasquez said, "we spend our own money, just to pay for the local students and researchers to attend" the conference.

Domeng Adriano, PhD, a retired engineering professor from the University of Georgia said, "South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the 60s." He said Korea rose from being poor to becoming one of the most affluent countries in Asia by promoting "timely technological innovations." Mr. Adriano said that Korea used academe-industry-R&D center collaboration to grow, and "effective government-political leadership" to help it along. He said that pumping financial capital into R&D is now at "something like 4% of GDP" for Korea, while the Philippines only puts in 0.3% of GDP. Mr. Adriano said PAASE is like a "spark plug," because it is an "exclusive group of scientists and engineers of Filipino origin." He said "it is very possible" to develop as an S&T nation, but the politics should support it. Mr. Adriano added that "we have the right academic mentality, but we just need industry involvement and the right government policy. He is concerned though, about the cost of education, especially to the poor who wish to avail of an S&T education.

Josefino Comiso, PhD of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, said PAASE can be a "facilitator in promoting new technologies, and advising local students and professionals." He said PAASE can play both in policy, and also at the grassroots with actual researchers. He pointed to a satellite sensing technology called MODIS which he is trying to bring to the Philippines, for possible benefits in such areas as locating large schools of fish from space, or weather/climate changes.

Ernesto Pernia, PhD of the UP School of Economics (and a former ADB senior economist) said that PAASE's conference was very timely, especially in promoting S&T. "As you know, S&T has been in the backwaters for a very long time," he said. Mr. Pernia added while the low GDP spending on R&D doesn't explain totally the slow economic growth, still "if we want to be competitive we need to catch up." Mr. Pernia said that the right way to tap PAASE is to continue using them to encourage collaboration between local researchers and their members who are based abroad. With the PAASE framework, he said the collaboration is becoming "more systematic."

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Economic surge elates Arroyo: 'Seize the moment'

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MANILA, Philippines -- Heartened by a surge of the stock market and the peso, President Macapagal-Arroyo yesterday called on Filipinos to "seize the moment" and said not even the heated election campaign could slow down the country's economic recovery.

Ms Arroyo said the stock market advance, the performance of the peso and the peak in overseas workers' remittances "are clear manifestations that our economic homerun is in play."

"Not even the intense politicking brought about by the forthcoming elections can spoil the larger gain of the economy," she said.

Share prices at the stock market hit a 10-year high on Thursday, pushing the main index closer to its all-time high of 3,447.60- recorded on Feb. 3, 1997. Shares declined 1.36 percent yesterday as investors cashed in on gains during the previous two sessions.

Asia's strongest currency

The peso, on the other hand, gained a hefty 25 centavos to close at 48.25 against the dollar on Thursday, and then closed yesterday at a new six-year high of 48.10.

The peso is Asia's strongest currency so far this year with a gain of 1.8 percent, spurred by strong inflows of remittances from overseas workers and a rally in the stock market.

Ms Arroyo spoke before the 27th annual meeting and the 2006 international science conference of the Philippine-American Academy of Science and Engineering held in Manila.

"Our eye is on the ball as we aim our volleys on better paying jobs, improved infrastructure, including technology, enhanced social services, the alleviation of poverty and hunger, fighting terror [and] nurturing the environment, all of which will benefit from technology," she said.

Aiming for the summit

"The Filipino people are shrugging off the past and looking forward to the fruits of steady growth, trade and investment."

Ms Arroyo also said: "We must all seize the moment, to reach the summit through our unity and hardwork, brandishing the Filipino team spirit that has gained renown worldwide. The Philippines is a team to beat when it comes to excellence, resiliency, and staying power in a competitive world."

Welcoming scientists from different parts of the world, the President said that in her administration's medium-term Philippine development plan, science and technology policies should be supportive of national development goals.

Lack of funds

"And this conference, dovetailing science and technology and economy, fits into that challenge," she said.

But she admitted there were specific challenges the country had to contend with, such as the lack of funds to bankroll research and development.

"The first order of the day for us was to put our economic house in order and find the funds to meet those challenges," she said. "Thanks to (Congress) we had our fiscal reforms, our peso strengthened, our interests went down and we saved P30 billion last year."

'Glowing reviews'

Ms Arroyo said savings and increased funds from revenues led to reforms. Thus, "the Philippines today basks in glowing reviews of our fiscal and economic reforms."

She told her audience that she had just come from a groundbreaking of a pharmaceutical company, Wyeth, in the Calabarzon area worth \$80 million, "and they said that they did this expansion because of our economic reforms."

Ms Arroyo announced she would issue an executive order creating a presidential coordinating council on research and development, fund the construction of a science complex at the University of the Philippines and release P200 million for science and engineering scholarship programs.