



'More fund scams possible due to lack of transparency'

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Civil society groups on Wednesday warned that the lack of transparency in the government's budget could lead to more misuse of taxpayers' money similar to the P728-million fertilizer fund scam.

"[Due to] lack of transparency, there's always a possibility for this (fund scam) to happen," Vincent Lazatin of Transparency and Accountability Network said at a forum in Sulo Hotel in Quezon City.

Lazatin said the lack of transparency on government expenditures could lead to more corruption because the right of the people to access government documents is being restricted.

He cited the P1.3-billion poll automation contract between the Commission on Elections and MegaPacific Consortium in 2004, which was voided by the Supreme Court due to irregularities.

The foreign-funded International Budget Project said the Philippine government provides "some information" about the national government's budget and financial activities "but that there is much room for improvement."

According to its Open Budget Index 2006, the Philippines scored 51 percent out of a possible 100 percent or complete budget transparency.

The index evaluates the quantity of information provided to citizens in the seven key budget documents that all governments should make public during the course of the budget year. Some 59 countries participated in the group's survey.

"The past two decades have seen growing interest in promoting public access to government in budget information. This interest reflects the understanding that access to information on government budgets and financial activities is essential to ensuring that governments are accountable to their citizens," IBP said.

"Timely access to such information enables citizens to participate in, and understand, policy decision that have profound impacts on their daily lives," the group added.

Leonor Briones, lead convenor of Social Watch Philippines, said the Constitution gives the President near total control of the national budget even after it is passed by Congress. "The law allows near total control of the budget by the executive [department]," she said.

Briones said the Constitution allows the President to veto the budget passed by Congress, prompting most lawmakers to approve the proposed budget without cuts.

She said the law also permits the President to reallocate funds from what they are originally intended for.

Briones urged legislators to allow wider access to public documents and allow public participation in the preparation, appropriation, implementation and funds accounting of the national budget. She said budget deliberations are often conducted behind closed doors.

"There are aspects in the budget that are not available to the public...I'm not aware of public consultations during the preparation of budget. What we know only is the Congress scrutinizing [the proposed budget but during] the preparation stage the public has no participation," she said.