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Ringmaster cons Senate

> *"The planters had the impression that the order will cover only refined sugar imports. Lamata said the industry group disagreed with the final equation because it will come in October or November right during the milling season.*

The effort to take the Senate for a ride was too palpable in the narration of Hermenegildo Serafica on claiming that Sugar Order 4 had the initial approval of President Ferdinand "Bongbng" Marcos Jr. and that the 300,000 metric tons received industry approval.

If at all, the industry that Serafica should be referring to would only be the Philippine Sugar Millers Association of businessman Pablo Lobregat who admitted before the Senate Blue Ribbon panel of having recommended the volume in the importation program.

In the hearing on 30 August, Serafica kept on dwelling on the President was informed of the supply situation on sugar and that he instructed the crafting of an importation plan.

He intentionally left details in his chronicle of events.

The plan was approved but Serafica admitted that the amount of imported sugar was not taken up.

Serafica did not specify that only the plan and not the actual importation was discussed during his meeting with the President.

"At that point, your honor, there was no volume talked about," Serafica ceded only when Senator Risa Hontiveros asked if he received a "go signal from Malacanang on the 300,000 metric tons volume."

Thereafter, Serafica said he was only directed to "prepare a draft order on another import program for SRA board approval."

> *"In the hearing on 30 August, Serafica kept on dwelling on the President was informed of the supply situation on sugar and that he instructed the crafting of an importation plan.*

He then indicated that the proposal received the approval of the industry and that nobody objected.

It was during the industry meeting that the 300,000 metric tons importation volume surfaced.

United Sugar Producers Federation president Manuel Lamata best described what transpired next.

Lamata said their organization was misled about the intent of President Marcos.

His group was made to believe that the President ordered the sugar importation of 300,000 MT when the SRA sought their backing which led to the drafting of SO 4.

'This is what the President wanted because it is an emergency and because the prices are too high," Lamata quoted Serafica as saying.

"So who am I to question the wisdom of the President?" Lamata said.

Marcos, however, disapproved of the SRA plan but later on authorized half of the volume to be imported.

After we "agreed with (the importation of) 300,000 metric tons of refined sugar, lo and behold the SO 4 came out, for the purchase of 150,000 raw or brown and 150,000 refined sugar," he said.

The planters had the impression that the order will cover only refined sugar imports.

Lamata said the industry group disagreed with the final equation because it will come in October or November right during the milling season.

Only the mills which have refineries that can process brown sugar benefit from the importation because they will collect refining charges.

Serafica earlier admitted to crafting the SO 4 draft on his own without the knowledge of deputy administrator Guillermo Tejida.

His excuse was that what he crafted was an importation plan which he did not want "to let anybody know until such time it will reach the Office of the President."

Sadly, Serafica believes that the Senators and Filipinos observing the sugar fracas were all born yesterday.

The Manila Times®

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Protect sugar farmers – Go

SEN. Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go urged the government to protect small farmers as the Senate investigates an alleged unauthorized order to import sugar into the country.

The Senate Blue Ribbon Committee on Tuesday, August 30, resumed its hearing on the issuance of Sugar Order 4 by the Sugar Regulatory Administration, which would have allowed the importation of 300,000 metric tons of sugar without the approval of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., who also acts as the head of the Department of Agriculture.

"The welfare of the Filipinos, especially the poor, is important for me. They're the most affected by the rising prices of commodities. We have to balance it carefully, the interest of our countrymen is important, especially the livelihood of the local farmers," said Go.

The vice chairman of the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee called for a deeper probe on the reported shortage of sugar in the country.

"It is important to uncover the truth. Is there really a shortage? Do we really need to import? It is the duty of the government to monitor everything and prevent the soaring of prices because it is the ordinary Filipinos who are the most affected by this. It is important that we protect the agricultural sector," the senator said, adding that charges have to be filed in court against those who may have violated the law.

Go lauded the series of warehouse inspections initiated by the Bureau of Customs in response to reports of sugar hoarding across the country.

JAVIER JOE ISMAEL

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL
Everybody's Newspaper

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Zubiri calls on sugar sector to unite

SENATE President Juan Miguel "Migz" F. Zubiri calls on sugar industry stakeholders to unite to address problems facing their sector.

The Senate chief made the appeal during the second hearing of the Blue Ribbon Committee Tuesday, August 30, 2022, on the sugar importation mess involving the Sugar Regulatory Administration, saying sugar associations should stop fighting and calling each other names in statements and online posts.

"What's important is that we unite," Zubiri said in Filipino. "Let's come up with a bottomline scenario of helping the industry. Let us help each other help the industry, other than attacking each other," he added.

During the hearing, Zubiri, whose privilege speech prompted the Senate inquiry, reiterated his call for reforms in the government's importation policies, as well as in the industry's practices.

He stressed the need to help local farmers and millers, while considering the interest of the consumers.

Meanwhile, Senator Francis Tolentino confirmed that Executive Secretary Victor Rodriguez will not be able to attend the hearing as he will be preoccupied with the state visits of President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. to Indonesia, Singapore, and the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Tolentino said that Rodriguez respects the authority and work of the blue ribbon committee and even volunteered to attend the first sugar hearing but considering the state visits of the Chief Executive Rodriguez cannot possibly attend the next hearing scheduled next Tuesday Sep. 4. *PS Jun M. Sarmiento*

PEOPLES JOURNAL Tonight

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Zubiri calls on sugar sector to unite

By PS JUN M. SARMIENTO

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THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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Sugar probe ends; Subic port officials reinstated

By ROBERTZON RAMIREZ and BEBOT SISON JR.

SUBIC BAY FREEPORT – Six Bureau of Customs (BOC) officials relieved from their posts in the Port of Subic on suspicion of involvement in the supposed smuggling of sugar from Thailand have been exonerated and reinstated.

An order signed by acting Customs Commissioner Yogi Filemon Ruiz last Wednesday, reinstated the Port of Subic's Maritess Martin as district collector, Maita Acevedo as deputy collector for assessment and Giovanni Ferdinand Leynes as deputy collector for operations.

Also reinstated were Belinda Lim as chief of the Assessment Division, Vincent Mark Malasmas as Enforcement and Security Service (ESS) district commander, and Justin Roman Geli as Customs Intelligence and Investigation Service (CIIS) supervisor.

In a statement last Wednesday, the BOC said it had terminated its investigation after finding "no negligence" on the part of the six officials in the performance of their respective duties.

"Results of the investigation conducted by the Internal Inquiry and Prosecution Division of the Customs Intelligence and Investigation Service (IIPD-CIIS) showed that there was no negligence on the part of the Subic personnel in the discharge of their duties,"

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THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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Sugar From Page 1

read the BOC statement.

Their relief from duty stemmed from the discovery of at least 140,000 bags (at least 7,000 metric tons) of refined sugar brought into the country by cargo vessel *M/V Bangpakaew* from Thailand and consigned to Oro-Agritrade Inc. by one Malou Buerano.

But further investigation revealed that all of the documents for the sugar shipment were in order and the requirements met.

"The shipments were processed in accordance with the existing rules and regulations of the Bureau of Customs and pursuant to the provisions of the CMTA [Customs Modernization and Tariff Act], no violation or discrepancy in the subject shipments was found," the BOC said.

On reports that the import permit used for the cargo was recycled, the BOC said that "the SRA (Sugar Regulatory Administration) Clearances presented on the subject shipments proved authentic, not recycled as alleged" as it emphasized that "the investigators found all documents presented were complete and properly complied."

SRA asked to explain sugar importation

Meanwhile, sugar producers have sought an explanation from the SRA on how it arrived at the proposed importation of 150,000 metric tons of sugar, as embodied in the draft Sugar Order No. 2, which SRA intends to issue at the start of the upcoming crop year.

The request for a computation was sent to SRA chief David John Thaddeus Alba by the National Federation of Sugarcane Planters (NFSP), Confederation of Sugarcane Producers Associations (Confed) and Panay Federation of Sugarcane Farmers (Panayfed).

In their letter, the groups said they need the figures used by the SRA "so that we can reconcile our own data and come up with a consistent rationale for the volumes involved, as well as the delivery schedules proposed."

NFSP's Enrique Rojas, Confed's Raymond Montinola and Panayfed's Danilo Abelita signed the letter on behalf of their respective organizations.

The letter was in response to a request sent by Alba to all planters' federations, sugar millers and other stakeholders, asking for their comments on the proposed Sugar Order No. 2 (crop year 2022-2023), which will allow the importation of 150,000 MT of sugar.

But the three planters' federations, together with the Philippine Sugar Millers Association, are recommending the importation of 300,000 MT of sugar.

Based on their analysis of the supply and demand situation submitted by SRA, the producers had earlier recommended an initial importation of 150,000 MT to arrive as soon as possible to be followed by another 150,000 MT to meet domestic requirements until the peak of milling in November.

The producers emphasized the need to urgently address the current supply shortage, considering that the shortage has already forced some beverage manufacturers and food processors to close their operations, resulting in loss of jobs and income to many employees of the affected companies.

Senate probe

Yesterday, Sen. Francis Tolentino said charges will definitely be filed against individuals behind the sugar importation fiasco in the SRA as crafting of an order contrary to the law indicated motive.

The chairman of the Senate Blue Ribbon committee told reporters that the panel will release a partial recommendation on its inquiry on the sugar fiasco after its next hearing on Sept. 6.

"There will be a partial recommendation that can be released even while waiting for the testimony of other persons that could be tied up to the rest. It will not be that great factor and determinative of the partial outcome," Tolentino told reporters partly in Filipino.

"Definitely even partial release of the report, we will determine the persons who are inferentially and by virtue of circumstances liable. We will file charges, definitely," he added without naming names.

He said he would consult and wait for the comment and vote of other senator-members of the committee, but remained firm on issuing a partial report based on the findings of the three hearings on the case.

This is regardless of the panel's being "open" to the suggestion of other senators to invite Executive Secretary Vic Rodriguez to another hearing since the latter failed to answer questions in the first hearing because he had to leave early for an urgent Cabinet meeting.

Last week, former agriculture undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian said he signed the controversial Sugar Order No. 4 (SO 4) based on the authority given to him by Rodriguez through a memorandum.

Tolentino said the compelling issue about SO 4 is not about negligence, because "once you craft an order contrary to law, there is motive."

However, the senator received a letter from Rodriguez last Tuesday, informing the Senate committee that he could not attend the next committee hearing due to conflict in schedule.

Rodriguez explained he needed to prepare for President Marcos' upcoming overseas trips to Indonesia, Singapore and the United States next week.

For Sen. Risa Hontiveros, the seeming exemption of Rodriguez from Senate hearings does not sit well with her.

"Why would ES Rodriguez be an exemption? Less than 100 days, an excuse letter right away? Just attendance, not done yet. Are you afraid of recitation?" quipped Hontiveros.

"What the Blue Ribbon does is very simple. As far as I am concerned, my motion, carried by my colleagues, stands. The executive secretary should present himself before the Blue Ribbon," she said.

She noted there were high-ranking officials and Cabinet secretaries who personally faced various allegations before the Blue Ribbon such as then vice president Jejomar Binay and ES Jojo Ochoa during the time of the late former president Benigno Aquino III.

"I hope we get a chance to carry out our mandate because the agricultural industry and the Filipino people are waiting for an explanation," she said. – **With Gilbert Bayoran, Cecille Suerte Felipe**

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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Senators hit DA agency over P1.1-B undisbursed fund

Senators criticized yesterday the head of the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) under the Department of Agriculture (DA) for failing to disburse not even a single cent of the P1.1-billion funding for the purchase of composting facilities for biodegradable waste.

During a hybrid hearing of the Senate committee on agriculture, food and agrarian reform, chaired by Sen. Cynthia Villar, BSWM officer-in-charge Junel Soriano said the bureau is still preparing the documentary requirements for the procurement of composting facilities.

"As of today, we have not disbursed the funding of P1.1 billion," Soriano replied when asked by Sen. Imee Marcos about the program intended to help farmers.

Villar said she was dismayed over the non-implementation of a program that will provide training and composting facilities to farmers nationwide.

She said the funding was allocated for the program to address the rising cost of chemical fertilizer, which has tripled from P1,000 to P3,000 per bag.

"I urge the BSWM to invest in composting and vermicomposting facilities to allow farmers to produce their own organic fertilizer, which is good for our soil, and which is 38 percent degraded based on studies," Villar said.

She challenged Soriano to disburse the funding until the end of the year or resign from his post.

Soriano said he assumed the position only last Aug. 1.

Villar threatened to file cases against Soriano if he will not do his job.

Marcos said she was surprised with the admission of Soriano that not a single cent of the composting funds has been disbursed.

During the hearing, Villar also condemned Philippine Coconut Authority administrator Benjamin Madrigal over the slow distribution of the coco levy fund to coconut farmers.

Villar also asked Dionisio Alvindia to resign as director of the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization, which is another attached agency of the DA.

She said instead of focusing on the implementation of the regional comprehensive economic partnership, Alvindia formed an advisory council to do the work, which was not provided by law.

Villar warned Alvindia to cancel the advisory council or she would sue him. **– Cecille Suerte Felipe**

Daily Tribune
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Resigned DA Undersecretary Sebastian: Scapegoat for incompetence (7)

COUNTERPOINT
SALVADOR S. PANELO

> ***"Sebastian was part of the issuance of the questioned order, logically and necessarily, following the principle in law that the act of one is the act of all, his resignation would – and should have been accepted, especially so that his replacement has been appointed.***

12. The recognition by the President that there is indeed a sugar shortage in October of this year, if not presently;

13. The subsequent authorization by the President to the newly constituted SRA, following the resignation of its members, to import 150 metric tons of sugar;

14. The repeated pronouncement by the Press Secretary that there is only an artificial shortage resulting allegedly from the hoarding of thousands of bags of sugar in the warehouses of millers, a claim that has not been factually validated;

15. The memorandum of 18 July 2022 issued by Executive Secretary Vic Rodriguez ordered the preventive suspension of 90 days pending the result of the investigation on the sugar snafu, despite Mr. Sebastian's resignation and the appointment of his replacement by the President.

The last circumstance is a puzzler and places Mr. Sebastian in limbo.

The order of preventive suspension does not seem to hold water as the resignation of Mr. Sebastian appears to be irrevocable. Is the Executive Secretary laying the foundation for the dismissal of Mr. Sebastian from government service for cause leading to the forfeiture of his retirement benefits and perpetual disqualification from holding any public position?

If that is the intention, then there can be no greater cruelty that one could heap on a multi-awarded public servant known for his impeccable integrity.

An added insult to a grievous injury. An injustice and an outrage!

The resignations of Mr. Serafica and Mr. Valderrama have been accepted, and such acceptance of their resignation seems to indicate that the appointing authority was displeased by their participation in the issuance of Sugar Order 4. If that is so, since Mr. Sebastian was part of the issuance of the questioned order, logically and necessarily, following the principle in law that the act of one is the act of all, his resignation would – and should have been accepted, especially so that his replacement has been appointed. But the Executive Secretary ordered his preventive suspension, which means his resignation was not accepted. And why not? Here lies again the disconnect.

Is the President being intentionally misled or ill-advised to cover up for the incompetence of these officials in the inner sanctum of the corridors of power?

> ***"Is the President being intentionally misled or ill-advised to cover up for the incompetence of these officials in the inner sanctum of the corridors of power?***

Are they serving the President well, or are they clumsily eroding the good image of the President?

(To be continued)

Daily Tribune
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Man up, ES told

BY JOM GARNER
@tribunephl_jom

Senators Aquilino Pimentel III and Risa Hontiveros challenged Executive Secretary Vic Rodriguez yesterday to attend anew the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee investigation on the attempted illegal importation of 300,000 metric tons of sugar.

Pimentel insisted that the congressional hearings should not be closed "until and unless we, of the committee, get to cross-examine ES Rodriguez on the testimony he gave."

"This is our right as members of the Blue Ribbon Committee, and also as a matter of fairness to those he mentioned in his testimony in a very negative light," he stressed.

Hontiveros questioned Rodriguez's excuse why he would no longer attend the next hearing of the Senate committee cloaked with oversight functions.

Rodriguez attended the first hearing but excused himself before he could answer the senators' questions.

Pimentel insisted that the congressional investigation on the attempt to illegally import 300,000 metric tons of sugar should not be closed until Rodriguez is cross-examined.

"Why would ES Rodriguez be an exemption? He has yet to finish his 100 days in the office; he already has an excuse letter. He just needs to attend. Does he fear a recitation?" she asked.

Hontiveros said former high-ranking officials of government have routinely attended hearings of the panel to answer questions.

However, nearing the end of the previous administration, then-President Rodrigo Duterte, barred his top officials from attending congressional hearings without his prior approval.

According to resigned DA Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian, it was Rodriguez who cloaked him with the authority to sign Sugar Order 4 for the importation of 300,000 MT of sugar.

Duterte said the hearings had been taking too much of the time of his secretaries when they should be focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., on the other hand, has not made a pronouncement similar to Duterte's.

"As far as I am concerned, my motion, carried by my colleagues, stands. The Executive Secretary should present himself before the Blue Ribbon," she said.

According to the resigned Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian, it was Rodriguez who cloaked him with the authority to sign Sugar Order 4 for and on behalf of President Marcos.

Marcos is concurrently DA Secretary and head of the Sugar Regulatory Administration which issued SO 4. Sebastian said that during his meetings with the President and Rodriguez on 1 and 4 August, he got the impression that the importation had been greenlighted.

Hontiveros said the Palace may be receiving misleading information from an individual she did not name.

"Last night, there was a cargo that has been allegedly carrying smuggled sugar. However, it turned out that the shipping has legal papers," she said.

Marcos is concurrently DA Secretary and head of the Sugar Regulatory Administration which issued SO 4.

"Someone seems to be feeding Malacañang misleading information, and now the question is, what are the motivations behind it? While the ES continues to skip the hearings, the suspicions also grow. The questions only remain unanswered," she added.

Pimentel and Hontiveros insisted on Rodriguez answering questions after Senator Francis Tolentino, chair of the Blue Ribbon Committee, told members of the media that the panel would wrap up its investigation with a partial committee report even without the attendance of Rodriguez.

Tolentino said he received a letter from Rodriguez informing the panel of his absence from the next committee hearing scheduled on Tuesday, 6 September, because he would focus on the preparations for the President's upcoming foreign trips.

The next hearing would be the panel's last, Tolentino said.

Daily Tribune
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Food chain

What goes into the Philippines' beloved stew, *kare-kare*?

You boil the oxtail or meat of choice with chopped onion. The vegetables are often cooked separately by sauteeing in garlic.

The dish of many versions across the archipelago recently made it to Tatler Atlas' "100 best stews in the world," and Filipinos will heartily accept this ranking, even if it is the 53rd. The website's users voted on this category.

What some people could be worried about, however, is how dishes like the *kare-kare* could cost an arm and a leg pretty soon if the food supply situation is not resolved.

Garlic and onion shortages, even salt, are imminent, the Department of Agriculture has warned recently. Local production will not be enough to meet the expected demand, the DA said in reports that also detailed the grim scenario painted by its attached agencies, covering "surf" and "turf."

Government must find solutions to the current challenge of food sufficiency.

Importation is one, covering the gaps in supply, especially garlic and salt, which are essential to Filipino cooking. Cheap imports, however, compete with local producers, who are mostly hard-put as well to improve their systems with better technology.

> ***"Farmers remain among the country's poorest, and the youth are not eager to pursue a career in agriculture as it is considered non-lucrative.***

Daily Tribune
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'SRA, DA execs usurped BBM'

BY CHITO LOZADA
@tribunephl_cloz

Sugar planters have urged the Office of the Ombudsman to consider usurpation of power charges against resigned Sugar Regulatory Administration chief Hermenegildo Serafica and suspended Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian. ***Turn to page A6***

'SRA, DA execs usurped BBM'

What Serafica drafted was a sugar order which was entirely different from a plan that Mr. Marcos instructed him to come up with

From page 1

Both officials had been tagged as being behind Sugar Order 4 that Sebastian signed, bypassing the President who is also the head of the Department of Agriculture.

Serafica has dug his own grave by claiming that SO 4 has the imprimatur of the President, United Sugar Producers Federation Manuel Lamata said.

Lamata was referring to the statements made by Serafica during the Senate hearing on Tuesday where he claimed that Mr. Marcos was privy to the drafting of SO 4.

The industry, Lamata said, is responding to the call of Blue Ribbon Committee chairman Francis Tolentino "for the exposure of the truth behind the sugar importations fiasco."

Rodriguez memo

Sebastian signed SO 4 for President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos based on the authority he derived from a 15 July memorandum of Executive Secretary Vic Rodriguez authorizing him to sign documents in favor of the Chief Executive.

Lamata said a lot of disinformation has been coming from Serafica regarding the issue.

He maintained that the President did not approve Sugar Order 4 that Sebastian signed and which Serafica claimed was issued based on an instruction from the President.

"What was approved was an import plan, which is different from a sugar order," according to Lamata.

He added an import plan is a program on how much should be bought from abroad, "when should importation be made and what will be the guidelines."

National emergency?

Lamata said Serafica presented to stakeholders "the need for a resolution regarding the importation of 300,000 MT, *utos ni* Presidente (ordered by the President)."

"We were told that the importation volume was needed due to a national emergency," the Unifed head said.

He quoted Serafica as saying that importation is needed "to bring down the prices of sugar for retail."

"I signed a resolution supporting the importation telling myself 'who am I to question the wisdom of the President," Lamata said. "We were surprised when what came out in SO 4 was 150,000 refined and 150,000 raw sugar."

He added: "I never acceded to that, I never said yes to that. They changed everything that they told us."

Serafica and the company then used the resolution from stakeholders as an excuse in drafting SO 4 saying they have presented the order to industry members.

President Marcos subsequently allowed the importation of 150,000 metric tons of sugar divided equally between consumers and industrial users which was the right call, according to Lamata.

"Raw sugar is not needed by the market since sugar milling season had started," he said. "In two months, refined sugar will also start to come in."

About the bottlers' claim of a 650,000 metric tons shortfall, Lamata branded it as nonsense.

This is being touted to support the soft drinks makers' aim to get access to cheap imports.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER
BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

Date: 12 SEP 2022 Page: B1

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RICE, CORN INVENTORY DECLINE IN JULY

By Jordeene B. Lagare
@jordeenelagare

The Philippines' stocks of rice and corn at the beginning of July plummeted, based on a report from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Total rice inventory as of July 1 was at 2.03 million metric tons (MT), down by 6.6 percent from 2.2 million MT recorded in the same period a year ago, the PSA said.

It was also down by 2.7 percent from last month's 2.1 million MT.

Rice stored in commercial warehouses and the National Food Authority (NFA) depositories declined by 17.9 percent and 22 percent, respectively. Stocks of households increased by 8 percent.

"The total rice stocks as of July 01, 2022 were comprised of 52.3 percent from households, 39.8 percent from commercial warehouses, wholesalers, retailers and 7.9 percent from NFA depositories," it said.

Data from the Bureau of Plant Industry showed as of Aug. 18, the country imported 2.5 million MT of rice, with Vietnam accounting for the majority of imported rice at over 2 million MT.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said last month it would distribute more rice seeds to more farmers this year to help them boost productivity and income.

Through the National Rice Program, the agency targeted providing quality inbred and hybrid seeds in 15 regions spanning 1.8 million hectares (ha).

More than P6.4 million worth of seeds covering 582,780 ha of farmland has been given to farmers, of which P5.32 million are hybrid seeds and the remaining P1.1 million are certified seeds.

As of Thursday, local commercial rice in Metro Manila markets is being sold from P38 to P50 per kilogram, unchanged from a year ago, based on the DA's price monitoring.

Meanwhile, imported commercial rice ranges from P38 to P52 per kg, against P43 to P52 per kg a year prior.

Total corn inventory for the period was pegged at 746,920 MT, a decline of 19.2 percent from last year's 924,250 MT.

This also represented a 14.5 percent decrease from the previous month's 873,480 MT. INQ

The Manila Times®

Date: 02 SEP 2022 Page: A0

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Nueva Ecija lawmaker pushes PH onion center

NUEVA Ecija Third District Rep. Rossana "Ria" Vergara has filed House Bill 3110 or the "Onion Industry Development Act" that seeks the creation of the Philippine Onion Research and Development Center, envisioning the center as the government's lead agency in helping onion farmers who depend on the industry for their livelihood.

"This proposal further seeks to extend assistance to other farmers who also rely on onion-growing for a living for their families," Vergara said.

Vergara, also the principal author of the measure, said the R&D center will be expected to promote producing and marketing onion and conduct training programs for onion farmers on growing yields from the vegetable.

The lawmaker also said the center will partner with the Department of Agriculture, Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Science and Technology, and Department of Environment and Natural Resources in crafting long-term policies for the growth of the onion industry in the country.

She added that the bill also seeks to designate the town of Bongabon in the third district as the "Onion Capital of the Philippines" for its big contribution to the growth and development of the industry in the country.

JUST CHECKING Nueva Ecija Third District Rep. Rosanna "Ria" Vergara goes around a local wet or public market on Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2022, to ensure that the supply of onion and the prices of garlic are stable in her district. PHOTO BY CELSO M. CAJUCOM

Concerned quarters have described the filing of the Vergara bill as timely in the face of reported increases in the prices of onion across the Philippines.

The reports came on the heels of speculation that the crop is being hoarded in a number of warehouses in the country.

CELSO M. CAJUCOM

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Group urges probe of onions sold online

A GROUP on Thursday called on the Department of Agriculture (DA) to investigate reports that white onions, which are scarce in wet markets, are being sold online.

In an interview with *The Manila Times*, Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (Pcafi) President Danilo Fausto said the white onions offered on the internet are either imported or smuggled.

"Just like what they did with sugar, they should investigate the white onions that can be purchased online and make available red onions," Fausto said.

He said it is unlikely that the onions being advertised online are locally sourced.

"We harvested white onions in April this year and even if you have a cold storage facility, the bulbs can only last for three months and it's now September," Fausto said.

The DA should determine if the smuggling of white onions continues, as evidenced by the confiscation of nine trucks of the produce in Mindanao.

The bulbs are priced online from P524 to P726 per kilo.

Based on the market monitoring of the DA on Thursday, white onions are still unavailable in wet markets in Metro Manila.

Fausto said that local onion growers will start planting the bulbs in October and harvest in March next year.

"Onions do not survive in wetland, that is why farmers start planting in October and the latter part of November," he said.

Among the areas where farmers plant white onions are Nueva Ecija and Cagayan Valley.

Fausto also asked the DA to ensure the availability of red onions in the market.

"The red onions can be bought in Nueva Ecija at P120 per kilo. It should be about P140 a kilo in the local markets in Metro Manila," he said.

Based on the daily price watch of the agency, the retail price of white onions ranges from P120 to P170 a kilo in Metro Manila.

Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban maintained that there is no decision yet to import white onions since the inventory is still ongoing.

"We cannot say if there is a need to import white onions since the DA and the Bureau of Plant Industry are conducting the inventory to determine if we still have a supply of white onions," Panganiban said.

BELLA CARIASO

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Time to make a stand

FINER POINTS

FERMIN ADRIANO

SURPRISINGLY, our economic managers are awfully silent over the issue of whether to import sugar, particularly the volume that we need to address the supply gap. The shortage has resulted in soaring prices of sugar, particularly refined sugar, and the partial and total temporary closure of soft drink companies and food processors due to unavailability of refined or industrial grade sugar. This is happening despite claims of our authorities that there is no supply shortage and if there is, it is just an "artificial shortage," which they attribute to the hoarding activities by a few unscrupulous traders.

Yet, the claim doesn't make sense because the simple law of economics reminds us that when smuggling and hoarding proliferate and become lucrative ventures despite the threats of a hefty fine and incarceration, these are already foolproof evidence of the existence of a serious supply shortage. Lately, the administration seems to have grudgingly accepted that the sugar supply shortage is for real as the President approved the importation of 150,000 metric tons (MT) of sugar to address the problem.

Is it enough?

Unfortunately, there is no solid empirical basis and sound methodology used to arrive at the 150,000 MT figure except the claim that it was calculated on the basis of the demand of "local manufacturers." All we know is that it is half the amount recommended by the previous officials of the Sugar Regulatory Administration, at 300,000 MT. This sum is divided into 150,000 MT for industrial users of sugar (refined sugar) and 150,000 MT for producers and traders for use by consumers and other users (raw/brown sugar). The approval seems to be pointing to the direction that the entire import allocation of 150,000 MT will be for refined sugar because it is the one mostly used by "local manufacturers."

Will that be enough to meet the requirements of our soda makers and food processors? And if only importation of refined sugar is allowed, does that mean we don't have a supply shortage of raw sugar, which are mostly used by our local banana cue, *turon*, *gulaman* and *kakanin* (e.g., *suman*,

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Time to

puto, kutsinta, butse, bitso-bitso, among others) vendors? Should we not also be concerned with the plight of the hundreds and thousands of these poor vendors who have been hit hard by the soaring prices of food commodities, including sugar, which serves as an important raw material for their products?

Economic managers

This should have been the area where our economic managers could prove to be extremely useful. Given their expertise in economics and econometrics, and access to official data, both local and international, they could have easily determined the actual sugar supply and demand situation. Unfortunately, they opted to stay silent, probably fearful of the possible political backlash given the proven power of the sugar bloc lobby.

During the Duterte administration, the Economic Development Cluster (EDC), headed by then Finance secretary Carlos Dominguez 3rd, sought the assistance of the National Economic Development Authority, and the economists at the Department of Finance and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas in analyzing data on key commodities or development challenges facing the nation. I made presentations (representing the Department of Agriculture) on the supply and demand situation of a number of commodities such as pork, poultry, corn, fishery and sugar, and the impact of food inflation on overall inflation and nutritional status of our people. Dominguez required that all presentations must be submitted to the EDC Secretariat at least five days before the actual meeting took place so EDC members would have time to review the presentation materials.

Having thoroughly gone through the supply and demand data, particularly supply projection, as the EDC required that we should anticipate possible shortages in the future, the body collectively decided on the course of action to take. Thus, the immediate products of these deliberations were Executive Orders 133 and 134 (i.e., lowering of pork tariff and raising the minimum access volume allocation for pork due to the pork supply shortage as a result of the African swine fever and lowering of tariff on rice imported from India to align with the Asean tariff rate); support to the Livestock Industry Competitiveness bill filed in Congress; approval of fish importation due to the fish supply shortage; approval of sugar importation due to the damage wrought by Typhoon "Odette" on the sugar producing and milling region of Western Visayas; and strengthening support to the Rice Tariffication Law. Expectedly, there were vociferous protests against these measures from vested interest groups, but it was easier to defend the positions taken because they were based on solid empirical evidence and collectively arrived at by our economic managers.

Food inflation and malnutrition

The silence of our economic managers over the sugar importation issue does not bode well for the country because this early, it seems that their guidance on the future trajectory of an important sector of our economy is not being actively sought (as of the writing of this column). If the decision on whether to import sugar or not is weighed heavily by political consideration rather than economic science, there is possibility that the same kind of decision-making arrangement will happen as we contemplate importing other agricultural and food commodities. Unfortunately, we suffer from supply shortages of basic food commodities ranging from rice, pork, poultry and fish to yellow corn, cooking oil, garlic and even the lowly salt.

Our economic managers are aware that food inflation prominently figures in the calculation of our overall inflation rate. During one of the past meetings of the EDC, I noted that the contribution of food and non-alcoholic beverages (one of the 11 items used in estimating the consumer price index or inflation) from the period 2001 to 2021 to total inflation averaged at 43 percent annually. It reached almost 48 percent during the pandemic. This means that if we can significantly lower food prices, our inflation figure can be drastically reduced by around a third or more.

Malnutrition and stunting

What is more pernicious is that soaring food prices or high food inflation is the main reason for the widespread malnutrition and stunting among our kids. We dwelt at length on this in the past but they are worth repeating. The recently published study (2022) discussing "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World" revealed the dire nutritional status of the Filipinos:

– Prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity in the total population from 2019-2021 is 43.8 percent. Translated into absolute figure, this means that 50 million Filipinos are suffering from food insecurity, which is almost half of our population;

– Prevalence of wasting in children under five years of age is 5.6 percent in 2020;

– Prevalence of stunting in children under five year of age is 28.7 percent in 2020.

– Prevalence of low birthweight is 20.1 percent in 2015;

– World Health Organization data showed that the prevalence of malnutrition in the Philippines is 5.75 percent, compared to Thailand's 0.64 percent, 0.28 percent for Malaysia and 0.02 percent for Vietnam; and

– Prevalence of serious protein deficiency among our children as they grow older: for children ages 6 to 9, the prevalence of protein deficiency intake is 12 percent; for 10 to 12 years old is 21 percent; and for 13 to 17 years old, it went as high as 47 percent! (Angeles-Agdeppa (2019)).

Let your expertise be known

The debate on whether to import sugar or not and the volume required is but a microcosm of future debates we will be engaged in as we consider importing other food commodities that we are in short supply. Should policymaking be based primarily on political consideration or economic science? Should we cave in to the political interest of a few at the expense of the interest of the vast majority of our people?

Without our economic managers joining the fray to enlighten us on what is economically good for the country, we will never be able to solve many of the development challenges confronting us. The current situation we are facing in this sugar brouhaha is akin to calling a lawyer to diagnose and provide medication to an ill patient, instead of seeking the expertise of a medical doctor. Our economic managers are supposed to be the doctors of our economy. The rest are just "quack doctors" of the economy.

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Slow uptake in coco fund, rice mechanization scored

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

SENATOR Cynthia A. Villar on Thursday ordered the Department of Agriculture (DA) to streamline its bureaucratic procedures to accelerate the implementation of its rice mechanization program and the usage of the coconut levy fund.

The heads of two attached agencies of the DA were at the receiving end of senators' ire and disappointment during a Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform hearing on Thursday.

The chiefs of the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) and the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) were grilled by the committee for the slow implementation of their respective banner programs.

Sen. Cynthia A. Villar, the committee's chairperson, questioned repeatedly the creation of an advisory body to provide guidance on PhilMech's mechanization programs.

Villar argued that the creation of such a body was neither mandated nor stipulated in Republic Act 11203, or the rice trade liberalization law that paved the way for a rice mechanization program lodged under PhilMech.

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Slow uptake in coco fund, rice mechanization scored

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Villar did not mince words and immediately threatened to file a case against PhilMech Executive Director Dionisio G. Alvindia if the advisory body continues to exist and work.

"I will file a case against you if you will continue that advisory council," Villar said, referring to a certain DA order that created the advisory body on mechanization programs.

"You have to suspend this committee or else I will file cases against all of you. This is against the law, this is against the spirit of the law," she added.

Villar also questioned the delays in the disbursement and utilization of the PhilMech's P5-billion mechanization fund for rice farmers.

Alvindia explained that PhilMech has disbursed P3.2 billion of its P5-billion mechanization fund this year. Alvindia vowed that the whole fund would be obligated by the end of December.

Alvindia even committed to resign from his post if the implementation of the mechanization program under his helm fails.

"At least you have the principle [to resign] if you cannot do your work. [People] always commit [on doing things] but are afraid of resigning if they fail," Villar said.

Coco levy fund

AFTER PhilMech, it was PCA Administrator Benjamin Madrigal's turn to face the senators on his agency's implementation of the utilization of the coconut levy fund.

At the outset, Villar noted it has been 18 months since the law allowing the use of the multibillion-peso coconut levy fund was passed, and coconut farmers have yet to see a single centavo of benefit from it.

"The law was passed in February 2021. Why are you not implementing it? It has been 18 months. Are you stopping the implementation of this?" Villar said.

Madrigal explained that the PCA had to wait for the approval of the Coconut Farmers and Industry Development Plan (CFIDP) by the President, which only happened last June, before the release of the coconut levy fund could start.

Madrigal added that the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) already released in July some P755 million to certain implementing agencies. Under the law, the government will utilize at least P5 billion of the coconut levy fund annually.

DBM Undersecretary Tina Rose Marie L. Canda confirmed at the hearing that the agency has made certain disbursements to some implementing agencies of the CFIDP.

Canda said there are no current pending funding requests from other implementing agencies of the CFIDP. Due to this, Villar questioned Madrigal on why there are no funding requests given the length of time that has passed since passage of the law.

Madrigal explained that the implementing agencies should be the ones requesting for their fund under the CFIDP from the DBM. But Villar refuted Madrigal, arguing that the PCA should make the requests since it oversees the general implementation of the CFIDP.

"If you cannot do that then resign," Villar told Madrigal.

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Idle ₱1.1B for composting program angers Sen. Villar

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

FARMERS have been reeling from the steep rise in fertilizer prices that have swelled production costs, yet a P1.1-billion program to set up composting facilities, to boost local organic fertilizer supply, has barely moved.

The snail-paced implementation angered Senate Agriculture committee chief Sen. Cynthia Villar, who ordered those in charge to carry out the program by year-end at least, "or resign."

Senators grilled the head of the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) at Thursday's organizational meeting of the panel led by Villar, who stressed that the program would at least help farmers cope with rising production costs.

Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform expressed disappointment over the dismal implementation of the BSWM's composting facility program, given their funding of about P1.137 billion this year to set up what are called composting facilities for biodegradable (CFBW) to farmer-beneficiaries.

However, Villar received reports that BSWM's CFBW program has been delayed and marred by various concerns and difficulties, forcing the senator to file a resolution that led to Thursday's inquiry regarding the program's status.

"I want the DA through BSWM to invest in composting and vermicomposting facilities to allow farmers to produce their own organic fertilizers which is good for our soil, which is now 38 percent degraded based on studies," she said.

"If [a significant percentage] of our waste kitchen garden waste can be recycled into organic fertilizer, which is important now since chemical fertilizer has tripled in cost," that would improve the lot of farmers, the senator pointed out. "We are helping in waste management and producing free fertilizer for our farmers," she added.

Not a single centavo

DURING the hearing, it was revealed that BSWM has been unable to obligate nor distribute a single centavo of the CFBW program, leaving the P1.137 billion untouched to date.

BSWM OIC-Director Junel B. Soriano, who noted that he took over only last August 1, told lawmakers that the procurement for the CFBW program is currently ongoing with the bureau "completing" the "necessary" documents for the procurement.

The "turtle-paced" implementation of the CFBW program easily earned the ire of Villar and Sen. Imee R. Marcos, the vice chairperson of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform.

"*Ni isang kusing wala pang nabibili* for composting facility [You have not bought even a single unit of composting facility.]," Marcos said.

Villar said the CFBW program can boost production of domestic organic fertilizers that local farmers can use amid skyrocketing prices of inorganic fertilizers like urea. The P1.1-billion BSWM can procure some 1,100 units of CFBW.

Soriano disclosed that the bureau only sought the authority to procure the CFBW units from the Department of Agriculture's Office of the Secretary last February. The agriculture secretary that time was William D. Dar.

Soriano's explanation did not sit well with Villar, who demanded to know why Soriano needed to secure an authority from Dar before proceeding with the procurement process for the CFBW units.

Villar threatened to file a case against Soriano for alleged "incompetency" as bureau chief.

"The previous BSWM chiefs, even without the budget, were able to perform. You, you were just appointed by Dar and you are unable to perform," she said.

"Why? What was the instruction of Dar to you? Do not buy the composting facilities so that we will buy more overpriced fertilizer? Do your job properly, or else I myself will be the one to file a case against you," she added.

Soriano committedto complete BSWM's procurement process for the CFBW units by November.

Villar dared Soriano to submit a courtesy resignation should he fail to do this. "Will you submit a courtesy resignation if you fail?" Villar asked.

"We will do our best [to implement the program]," Soriano responded.

"You will file a courtesy resignation if you fail. Can you commit to me that you will resign if you will be unable to do it? If you are really determined to implement it, then commit your resignation," Villar said.

Marcos asked BSWM to submit all pertinent documents regarding the procurement and implementation of the CFBW program to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform.

Villar said the committee would schedule another hearing regarding the matter in November.

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Let's not forget that we are also facing a water crisis

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

If we do not address the country's water security situation, the impending food crisis will further worsen. Food production needs water. Unfortunately, there is now a global water crisis and we are not exempted.

Fifty-five people die every day from water-related causes. Around 16 million Filipinos have no access to drinking water. More than five million hectares of denuded forest lands and 300,000 ha. of lost mangroves have resulted in massive flooding. Thirty-four of our water-related agencies are not even coordinated.

La Niña is already upon us and we must move quickly. This phenomenon will cause debilitating floods, damaging our crops. But since we do not save the excess water, drought will only hit us worse when it comes. From water everywhere, we will have water nowhere.

Irrigation

Our rain harvesting rate is just a dismal 4 percent compared to places in India with a 60-percent rate.

The proposed budget of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) for 2023 was increased to P40.8 billion (a far-cry from the P9.3 billion for this year).

Perhaps a large portion of this should be devoted to small irrigation systems? NIA has a very large portion of its budget focused on the usual large irrigation systems.

Note that there is a smaller scale system called Small Water Impounding Project (SWIP). It is a structure constructed across a narrow depression or valley to hold back water. It develops a reservoir that will store rainfall and runoff during the rainy season for immediate future use. It helps prevent floods and provides livelihood opportunities such as fisheries. Its service area is usually 25 to 150 ha.

In a study done by Professor Rey Naval in Divisoria Norte, Quirino, he identified a 46-hectare SWIP worth P800,000, or about P17,400 per hectare. A hectare yields an average 2.08 tons or P31,314, giving a return on investment (ROI) of 180 percent.

Now compare this with a larger irrigation system. It usually costs P300,000 to irrigate a hectare with a yield of 4 to 8 tons (if there is an additional harvest during the same year.)

If palay costs P11.20 a kilo, the increased benefit is P44,800. The ROI is just 15 percent.

Based on the numbers from the Quirino project, SWIP yielded 12 times the ROI or effectiveness of the regular irrigation system. Given this analysis, a large portion of the NIA budget should be allocated to similar SWIPs.

Budget allocation

Such ROI criterion should be used to determine budget allocation per Water Security Movement, Inc. chair and former Bulacan Governor Roberto Pagdanganan.

On June 25, 2019, he told Congress and the Executive Department: "The NIA and [the Department of Agriculture] must prioritize irrigation repair and rehabilitation if these have higher ROIs than new construction."

In acknowledging our poor 4-percent water harvesting rate, he added: "The Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) should fast track the construction of water impounding dams."

The best management approach to solve our water crisis was also stated in a position paper by the Water Security Movement: "Implement immediately the Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) framework by supporting our 18 major water river basins through this successful decentralized approach used by many countries."

Today, the 18 public-private river basin management councils are poorly funded. They do not have the resources to successfully coordinate the billions in funds that the government water-related agencies have at their disposal, including irrigation alternatives most responsive to their unique needs.

Unless we address our water security problems through an effective public-private shared governance (via a river basin council) using the ROI approach, we will not effectively address our food crisis. INQ

The author is Agriwatch chair, former secretary of presidential flagship programs and projects and former undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade and Industry. Contact is agriwatch_phil@yahoo.com.

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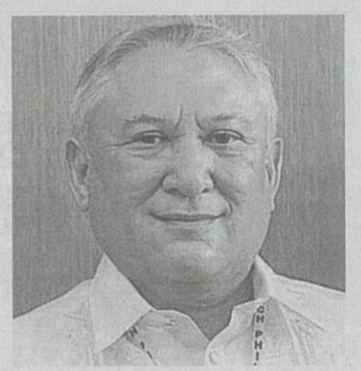
Sugar import cap questioned

By Carla Gomez
@carlagomezINQ

BACOLOD CITY—Three groups of sugar producers are asking the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) to explain how it arrived at the proposed importation figure of 150,000 metric tons of sugar.

The National Federation of Sugarcane Planters (NFSP), Confederation of Sugarcane Producers Associations (Confed), and Panay Federation of Sugarcane Farmers (Panayfed) sought clarification on the importation numbers in a letter to SRA Acting Administrator David John Thaddeus Alba on Aug. 31.



David John Thaddeus Alba
—CARLA GOMEZ

The importation of 150,000 MT of sugar was contained in the draft Sugar Order No. 2 which the SRA said it would issue within the month.

"It is not clear how and why SRA arrived at the figure of 150,000 MT. We would appreciate being advised on the figures used as reference so that we can reconcile our own data and come up with a consistent rationale for the volumes involved as well as the delivery schedules proposed," the letter read.

The letter was signed by NFSP's Enrique Rojas, Confed's Raymond Montinola and Panayfed's Danilo Abelita, and was in response to Alba's request for all planters' federations, sugar millers and other stakeholders to comment on the draft order.

The three planters' federations, together with the Philippine Sugar Millers Association which has also recommended the importation of 300,000 MT of sugar, account for the majority of the country's sugar production.

Not enough

Based on their analysis of the supply and demand situation submitted by the SRA itself, the producers earlier recommended a total importation of 300,000 MT, divided into two importations of 150,000 MT to arrive immediately, followed by another 150,000 MT to meet domestic requirements until the peak of milling in November, the three groups said.

They warned that sugar production at the start of the new milling season will not be enough to meet the expected demand from August to October. Thus, a buffer stock is needed to meet domestic sugar requirements until milling peaks in November.

The producers emphasized the need to urgently address the current supply shortage, considering it has already forced some beverage manufacturers and food processors to close their operations, resulting in loss of jobs and income to many employees of the affected companies.

They said the SRA should monitor market conditions to determine the appropriate time and calibrate the arrival of any additional importation.

The producers also proposed to the SRA that, instead of "C" (reserve) sugar classification, the proposed importation should be directly classified as "B" (domestic market) sugar to minimize the time it will take for the imports to reach the intended markets.

"In order to assist producers who are suffering from drastic increases in production costs and low purity of cane due to early milling, we request SRA to consider allowing the participation of eligible producers' groups in the proposed importation, in volumes proportionate to their production," the producers group said. INQ

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'YOU'RE SLACKERS'

SENATORS SCOLD AGRI OFFICIALS OVER UNSPENT, MISSPENT FUNDS

By Melvin Gascon
@melvingasconINQ

Agriculture officials received a tongue-lashing from senators on Thursday for their failure to spend funds allotted for their agencies and for improper spending that deprived farmers of the money's intended benefits.

At the hearing of the Senate committee on agriculture, Senators Cynthia Villar and Imee Marcos lashed out at officials of the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) for their failed programs to help farmers develop improved farming implements.

Such failure of PhilMech has prevented the price of local rice to be competitive against imported rice, Villar said. "How do you expect me to give you funds this year when you do not spend what was allotted for you?"

The committee tackled Resolution No. 158, which was aimed at looking into PhilMech's reported A2

SENATORS SCOLD AGRI OFFICIALS OVER UNSPENT, MISSPENT FUNDS

FROM A1

failure to implement the government's mechanization program as mandated by Republic Act No. 11203, or the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL).

The panel was also hearing another resolution on the slow distribution of composting facilities for biodegradable waste (CFBW) units by the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) and the delay in the distribution of the coco levy fund.

According to the senator, she agreed to the passage of the RTL mainly for the funds it was supposed to derive from rice tariffs that were intended to benefit farmers, through the support for mechanization and the purchase of superior-quality seeds.

Villar railed about PhilMech's performance record this year, which showed that from January to June, it was able to spend only P159 million of its P5-billion budget for 2022, or a disbursement rate of 3.2 percent.

Poor implementer

"Commit *lang kayo nang* commit *pero nangangamote ka sa* implementation, *pero ayaw nyo namang mag*-commit *na mag*re-resign *kayo kung di n'yo nagawa* (You keep on making commitments but you are slackers in implementation; yet, you refuse to commit your resignation in the event that you renege on your commitment)," she said.

The senator blamed the creation by the Department of Agriculture (DA), under then Secretary William Dar, of an advisory council that was supposed to craft policies on the mechanization program.

According to Villar, the RTL authorized only PhilMech to implement the mechanization program, and the "spirit" of the law did not authorize any other body.

"You better stop this (advisory council) or I will file charges against you. I will use my own money to hire lawyers and file charges against you on behalf of the people of the Philippines," she warned.

Villar claimed that the DA created the council to allow them to manipulate the contracts involving the purchase of farming equipment.

"The problem with this government is that too many people are meddling into other people's functions. You have no mercy for the farmers!" she exclaimed.

Villar also castigated the BSWM for its failure to distribute composting facilities for biodegradable wastes to farmers, which she said could have helped them stem the high cost of fertilizers.

During the hearing, BSWM officer in charge Director Junel Soriano disclosed that the P1.1-billion fund for the composting program remained unused.

An agency under the DA, the BSWM is responsible for advising and rendering assistance on matters relative to the use of soils and water as vital agricultural resources.

The composting program aims to boost farmers' productivity through training and education and the distribution of composting equipment.

Farmers suffer

"You are always complaining about the high cost of fertilizers, but as it appears now, what you really want is that no fertilizers will be available locally so that you will again resort to importation and make money out of it," she said.

According to Villar, the BSWM was supposed to distribute 90 units of composting machines a month, with each machine able to produce about a ton of organic fertilizer.

"You are still in the procurement process and it's already (September). Where do you intend to put the money if you do not spend it, the PITC again?" she asked, referring to the Philippine International Trading Corp., which has been flagged for the rampant practice of other government agencies "parking" their unspent funds.

"Don't you ever think of putting your money in PITC again," Villar warned.

Sen. Imee Marcos, committee vice chair, expressed disgust that because of inefficiency, farmers were made to wait for the intended benefits of the RTL, which included the P5,000 subsidy, support for farming equipment, organic fertilizers from composting facilities, and better rice seeds.

"Our farmers are being made to suffer by the DA with no aid coming from the government, and it seems that the DA is doing these on purpose," she said.

In his response, Dionisio Alvindia, PhilMech director, vowed to fully spend the P5-billion funding of the agency within the year, or he would resign.

He explained that coming into PhilMech, he inherited "a lot of problems."

But Villar cut him off: "There are no problems; you are the problem." INQ

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DTI backs industry users to import sugar

By Othel V. Campos and Macon Ramos-Araneta

TRADE Secretary Alfredo Pascual on Thursday proposed allowing food and beverage manufacturers to import their own sugar needs as the Bureau of Customs admitted that the bags of sugar it seized in Subic port were not illegal or smuggled.

Pascual acknowledged that the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) had the last say on sugar imports, but said the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) also recognizes the needs of manufacturers who use sugar for their production.

The DTI has included sugar in its regular monitoring rounds in groceries and supermarkets that pledged to lower the retail price of sugar to P70 per kilo.

The DTI said the inspection of warehouses storing sugar will continue until the price of sugar reflects real market prices.

Before the crackdown, a group of community bakers said there could be sugar hoarding, since prices had doubled despite the availability of the sweetener. *Next page*

DTI...

From A1

According to the Philippine Food Processors and Exporters Organization Inc., only a few selected industrial users are now allowed to import for their own supply.

"These select few (users) will not amount to 10 companies. But we have many manufacturers that are also using sugar in their operations. We hope we will also be given the opportunity to import our own sugar requirement," said Philfoodex president Ruben See.

One of the biggest industrial users, Coca-Cola Beverages Philippines, Inc. (CCBPI), asserted that industrial manufacturers need premium industrial grade sweeteners to produce premium products.

"We'd like to emphasize, however, that not all sugar is the same. Food and beverage manufacturers need premium refined sugar to maintain high-quality products. This type of sugar is not the same sugar that is commonly used in households," the company said in a statement.

The beverage industry needs at least 450,000 metric tons (MT) of premium refined bottler grade sugar to use 100 percent of its manufacturing capacity for the remaining months of 2022.

CCBPI noted that the Philippine food and beverage industry's operations were hurt by the sugar shortage.

The company has adopted various measures aimed at cushioning the business impact of the lack of premium refined sugar supply. ***(See full story online at manilastandard.net)***

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UNA SA BALITA

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Cynthia Villar pinalalayas PCA chief

NABUWISIT Senadora Cynthia Villar sa pinuno ang Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) at hinamon itong magbitiw sa puwesto dahil sa naantalang pagpapatupad ng batas na magtatakda sa benepisyo ng mga maliliit na coconut farmers.

Sa pagdinig Senate committee on food and agriculture, sinabihan ni Villar si PCA Administrator Benjamin Madrigal Jr. na iwan na ang kanyang puwesto kung hindi nito kayang tulungan ang mga magniniyog.

Nangako naman si Madrigal na kanyang ipatutupad ang naturang batas.

Si Villar ang may-akda ng Republic Act 11534 o Coconut Farmers and Industry Trust Fund Act, na naglalayong magbuo ng trust fund para sa mga magniniyog sa pamamagitan ng pagbenta ng assets na nakuha ng gobyerno sa pamamagitan ng coco levy fund. **(Dindo Matining)**

Abante TONITE
MABILIS SA BALITA
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Villar gagastos para idemanda agri exec

Nagbanta si Senador Cynthia Villar na sasampahan niya ng kaso ang mga opisyal ng Department of Agriculture (DA) kung masusupinde ang pagpapatupad ng memorandum na labag sa Rice Tariffication Law.

Sa pagdinig ng Senado, binanggit ni Villar ang Memorandum No. 34 na nagbubuo ng advisory council para sa pagpapatupad ng farm mechanism program na dapat gagawin ng Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech).

Inisyu ang nasabing memorandum sa panahon ni dating DA secretary William Dar.

Sa ilalim ng Rice Tariffication Law nagbuo ng P10 biyong Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) kung saan ang P5 bilyon ay para sa farm mechanization, P3 bilyon sa seedlings at P1 bilyon sa expanded rice credit assistance.

"Don't implement this memo. You have two memos that you implemented through Secretary Dar. The Memo 34 which created an advisory council to implement the mechanization program of the RCEF, that is against the law," galit na pahayag ni Villar.

"I will tell you, I will file a case against you if you don't stop this advisory committee," banta pa ni Villar, chairperson ng Senate committee on agriculture, food, and agrarian reform.

Ayon kay Villar, noong panahon ni dating PhilMech director Baldwin Jallorina, 80% ang nilabas na pondo para sa mechanization program subalit bumaba ito sa 43%.

Sabi naman ni Dionisio Alvindia, ang kasalukuyang PhilMech director, hindi pa naipatutupad ang naturang memorandum at hiniling niya sa DA na palitan siya bilang concurrent director ng Philippine Integrated Rice Program para matutukan ang trabaho bilang pinuno ng PhilMech.

Aniya, minana rin niya ang maraming problema nang kanyang pamunuan ang PhilMech noong Marso 3.

Pero giit ni Villar, si Alvindia ang problema dahil sa nagdaang liderato ng PhilMech, nagawa namang magpatupad ng 82% ng mechanization program.

"Hijo, i-suspend mo itong komi-kumite na ito ha. Otherwise, idedemanda ko kayo... Ako magdedemanda sa inyo. I will spend for the lawyer's fee para idemanda kayo. People of the Philippines against you," sabi ni Villar. **(Dindo Matining)**

Pilipino Star
NGAYON
Diyaryong disente ng masang intelihente

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Presyo ng bigas, tataas ng P4 sa Okt.

Nagbanta ang farmers group na Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) na posibleng tumaas ang presyo ng bigas ng mula P3 hanggang P4 sa susunod na buwan ng Oktubre.

Ito, ayon sa SINAG ay dahil hindi naibigay ng pamahalaan sa mga palay farmers ang cash aid na gagamitin sana sa panahon ng pagtatanim.

Dahil anila sa delay ng pagkakaloob ng ayuda, tumaas na ang presyo ng input sa mga sakahan na ugat ng pagtataas sa presyo ng bigas.

Nilinaw naman ng Department of Agriculture (DA) na dahil kulang sa requirements na kailangan para maipalabas ang pondo sa mga magsasaka kayat hindi naibigay sa tamang oras ang cash aid.

May P5,000 ang cash aid ng bawat magsasaka.

Ni ANGIE DELA CRUZ

Sinasabing ang requirement lamang ng Landbank ay ang magkasamang magpapalitrato ang mga tauhan ng DA sa mga magsasaka.

Hindi naibigay ang picture dahil walang photographer ang DA noong panahong iyon.

Gayunman, nangako

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Importing salt

I was surprised to learn two weeks ago that we are importing 93 percent of our salt requirements of 550,000 metric tons from China and Australia. Such a simple ingredient for food processing and for other industrial uses, but we can't produce enough of it.

Yet, we are an archipelago of 7,100 islands with a coastline of about 10,850 statute miles, twice as long as that of continental United States.The sea and all the salt in it are all around us, but like fish, we are importing our needs. Is there anything we can produce and not have to import other than corrupt and incompetent officials?

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

BOO CHANCO

When I was growing up, I was fascinated to see the salt beds in Las Piñas and Parañaque on our way to the beaches along the Manila Bay shoreline. Yes, the beaches there were clean enough to swim in at that time.

I guess all those salt beds are now subdivisions. After all, Sen. Cynthia Villar said land in Las Piñas is now very expensive. And the beaches are gone. Manila Bay is now a cesspool that is dangerous to the health of anyone who dares swim or even wade along its shores.

When I posted on social media my thoughts on importing salt, I got comments that seem to indicate I was not the only one surprised and disgusted. Apparently, the death of our salt industry can be blamed on Republic Act 8172 or also known as the "Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide" or the ASIN Law.

The ASIN law was passed in 1995 with the good intention of addressing health needs of some of our people, specially in upland areas, who lack iodine in their diet. That results in thyroid problems among others.

The ASIN Law requires local producers to shift to iodized salt production. Salt producers figured it was too much trouble to iodize the salt. Salt making is a backyard industry and the small-scale producers do not have the financial and technical means to comply, so they just abandoned the business.

My colleague Stella Arnaldo, who writes on tourism and food, explained in an article she wrote back in 2017 why the ASIN Law was bad news to the local culinary industry, as well as food processors. While iodized salt isn't exactly poison, it isn't as good as ordinary rock salt.

Stella interviewed a popular Filipino chef who raised the alarm on the non-foodgrade salt being imported and sold commercially in our market. Chef Myke "Tatung" Sarthou told Stella that "if you notice, this salt doesn't melt even when you cook it, because it's meant for soap, and to make other industrial products (like dyes, plastics, polyester, etc.).

"So, even if you keep adding it to your dish, it has no effect. Our export clusters are experiencing problems because many countries refuse to allow the entry of products containing iodized salt. They prefer natural salt."

Salt is being used not only for food, but also for agriculture, manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals. Essentially, it is a criminal act to sell natural salt.

While there are a few natural salt retailers that sell openly in specialty weekend markets, Sarthou said they do so with a lot of risk. If they are caught, their business permits will be revoked and they will be fined anywhere from P1,000 to P100,000. Local restaurants are required to serve only iodized salt.

I was in Bohol two months ago on the invitation of Panglao Bluewater Resort. That was when I was introduced to Bohol's asin tibuok or "unbroken salt." It is an oval piece of salt inside a mold looking like an ostrich egg.

The salt making facility is located in the town of Albuquerque in Bohol. Because of the ASIN Law, the asinderos aren't allowed to sell their products locally, but they are approved for export.

We have a strange government with strange laws. I noticed an ad in Lazada that sells the Bohol Tibuok salt for P1,704.22. Hmm… interesting that Lazada seems exempted.

Other than Bohol, Stella wrote about old women boiling seawater until only the salt remains. "In places like Guimaras, for instance, the salt is boiled with *gata* or coconut milk, then formed into blocks called *tultul* or *dukdok* in Capiz.

Chef Myke pointed out the importance of salt in Filipino dishes, including fermenting seafood to make *bagoong*, dried fish, and for processing *tinapa*.

But he told Stella, the proliferation of non-foodgrade salt had an impact on the small makers of *bagoong* and *tinapa*. Using industrial-grade salt in these food processes lowers the quality of traditional food products, making them less palatable to consumers.

What is it with us and our politicians that prevents us from doing what is right? Even in the presence of good intentions, unwanted unintended consequences happen.

Our problem is over regulation. Markets should always be given a choice. Banning one product to favor another for the same purpose doesn't work. Iodized and natural salt should be able to coexist.

If at all, the government should just limit the compulsory use of iodized salt in the mountain and inland areas where it is needed, and heavily subsidize its price so that it will be chosen over natural salt by those who need it most.

Congress should amend or repeal the Salt Act because of its negative unintended consequences. Our problem is we have too many lawmakers with so much time on their hands. They should have left salt alone.

It is embarrassing to try to explain to foreign friends why we are importing salt and why we can't produce our own salt from the seas around our archipelago. Or why we are importing fish.

Or why sugar is more expensive here. That's because the industry leaders salted dollars in foreign banks. Those dollars were made when exporting sugar made sugar barons disgustingly rich. But that's another story.

For now, let's think about how odd it is that our archipelagic country must import salt. No Filipino can be proud of that.

Boo Chanco's email address is *bchanco@gmail.com*. Follow him on Twitter *@boochanco*

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'Bulacan swine flu cases contained'

MALOLOS – The provincial government of Bulacan believes African swine fever (ASF) cases in the province have been contained.

Bulacan provincial veterinarian Voltaire Basinang said the latest ASF cases in the province were detected in Sta. Maria town on Aug. 1. The affected hogs were "culled and properly disposed."

No other ASF case was detected in the province based on monitoring by the Bulacan veterinary office.

Gov. Daniel Fernando ordered strict monitoring and biosecurity measures in hog farms in the province to prevent the spread of the swine disease.

Fernando assured hog raisers and consumers that the provincial government would implement the necessary measures to support the swine industry.

He gave assurance that pork and pork products from Bulacan are safe to eat.

The provincial government of Aurora had earlier issued an executive order banning the entry of hogs and pork products from Bulacan and nearby provinces with confirmed ASF cases as a precautionary measure.

The ban is in effect from Aug. 30 to Sept. 30. – **Ramon Efren Lazaro**

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Palay farmgate prices up in June

By DANESSA RIVERA

The average farmgate prices of palay or unhusked rice increased by 2.3 percent to P17.58 per kilogram in June, latest data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed.

This brought the second quarter average to P17.35 per kilogram, an increase of 1.6 percent from the average farmgate price of P17.07 per kilogram in the same period last year.

Of the 16 regions, seven saw annual increases which contributed to the overall year-on-year growth.

The PSA data showed Western Visayas continued to post the highest annual increment at 16.6 percent during the month followed by the Central Visayas with a 14.3 percent jump.

On the other hand, nine regions recorded price declines, with the MIMAROPA region having the highest decline at 7.2 percent followed by the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) at 4.2 percent.

On a month-on-month basis, the average farmgate price of palay per kilogram increased by two percent from P17.24 per kilogram in May.

The highest monthly growth was recorded in Eastern Visayas at 18.7 percent while the biggest decline was seen in the Caraga Region at 3.2 percent.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) earlier attributed the increase to higher fertilizer, production and marketing costs, slightly increasing import prices, and relatively tighter supply in the market compared to last year.

As of July 1, the country's rice inventory declined by 6.6 percent from 2.18 million metric tons last year to 2.03 million MT, according to PSA's latest rice and corn stocks inventory report.

On a month-on-month basis, the inventory is 2.7 percent lower than the 2.09 million MT registered in June.

According to the PSA, rice stocks inventory in commercial warehouses/wholesalers/retailers dropped by 17.9 percent, and by 22 percent in National Food Authority depositories. However, stocks in households grew by eight percent.

For this year, estimates of the Philippine Rice Research Institute showed palay production could decrease by as much as 1.1 to 1.3 million metric tons.

This will come from the 19.96 million metric tons (MT) record level of production last year.

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GOTCHA

JARIUS BONDOC

As rice shortage looms, farmers remain unaided

Expect low rice harvest and high prices as usual this Christmas. The Philippines must import 2.9 million tons – 58 million sacks. That won't be easy. The Ukraine war and weather disturbances have cut other countries' grain productions.

The government can only depend on Filipino farmers. Yet it has not fully handed out the small cash incentives for 2021 to many of them. And it still has to start distributing the aid due this 2022.

More than 400,000 planters have yet to receive P5,000 each in Rice Farmer Financial Assistance for 2021. The cash should have been given out in September-October last year, former agriculture secretary Leonardo Montemayor laments. The government-owned Land Bank will begin paying only this week, and only to 91,000 in Ilocos, Cagayan, Central Luzon and Western Visayas. The rest will have to wait as the bank sorts out paperwork.

The RFFA recompenses farmers for income lost from the flood of imports starting 2020. Only a little over a million are eligible, those who own less than two hectares; half a million others won't get aid. The Development Bank of the Philippines has paid RFFA to 600,000 others as of last June.

Another P5,000 each for 2022 has yet to be distributed to the million-plus small farmers, says Montemayor, Federation of Free Farmers chairman. That's on top of the seedling and fertilizer aid under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Program. Government already has the money for it – from rice import duties collected starting mid-2021.

It will have a hard time sourcing the 2.9-million-ton shortfall from abroad. That's in addition to 508,000-ton emergency stocks, good for 15 days, it must store for typhoons, earthquakes and drought.

China's northern wheat lands suffered floods in the first half of 2022, then a 70-day heatwave in southern rice fields. It will import six million tons of rice to offset its poor harvest. Drought ruined wheat crops in America and India, forcing international buyers to shift to other cereals, principally rice. But India's rice harvest has dropped by 10 million tons.

Harvests in Thailand and Vietnam, the Philippines' main suppliers, are expected to increase. But rich countries will also line up at their export doors and likely elbow out poor Philippines. Playing up ASEAN neighborliness can only do so much. Singapore and strife-torn Myanmar also need rice. All ten ASEAN members, plus Korea, Japan and Timor, are storing up in case of war between China and Taiwan.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February delayed the latter's wheat cropping as one of the world's largest suppliers. Disrupted too was planting in neighboring Poland and Belarus. Nitrogen fertilizer, derived mainly from natural gas, fell due to economic sanctions against Russia, the world's largest producer. Deliveries were stuck in Black Sea embargos. The world shifted to costlier potassium and phosphate fatteners.

Fertilizer prices have tripled in the Philippines, crippling not only rice farmers. Planters of corn, sugar, vegetables and fruits also groan.

* * *

Catch *Sapol* radio show, Saturdays, 8 to 10 a.m., *dwIZ* (882-AM). Follow me on Facebook: *https://tinyurl.com/2p93kxm9*

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Sugar and politics (2)

VANTAGE POINT

VAN YBIERNAS

THE sugar industry became embroiled in political controversy in the early 1920s for complex reasons. Remember that in 1909, the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909 imposed a quota of 300,000 metric tons on Philippine sugar exports to the United States, which the Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act of 1913 promptly removed. Then World War 1 erupted in 1914 and Philippine sugar exports to the United States expanded. In 1916, the Philippine National Bank (PNB) was created through Republic Act 2612 to provide financial support to the country's cash-crop economy. Then things get a bit messy.

In 2007, I published a scholarly article for Ateneo's *Philippine Studies* journal entitled "Philippine Financial Standing in 1921: The First World War Boom and Bust," where I explained the entire mess. As mentioned, the cash-crop economy was booming because of the war. Sugar *hacenderos* (planters) and millers borrowed heavily from the PNB, which eagerly approved the massive loans because exports (to the United States) were growing at a dizzying pace. PNB's deposits also soared because the bank became almost the primary depository of the national treasury. Everything was fine until late 1919 when demand for sugar (and cash-crops in general) began to slow down.

In 1920, things turned ugly. As sugar exports faltered, the hacenderos and millers defaulted on their PNB loans, and the bank began to suffer liquidity problems. As PNB was previously designated as the primary depository of the national treasury, the colonial government found itself insolvent. Insular Auditor (the equivalent of the Commission on Audit today) William Nolting rued that the problem "will take a long period to straighten out and will result in heavy losses to the government."

Coincidentally, in the 1920 elections in the United States, the Republicans regained control of the White House. President Warren Harding subsequently formed an investigating mission to ascertain the readiness of the Philippines for independence (consistent with the preamble of the Jones Law of 1916) and to propose American policy in the archipelago. The mission was headed by Army Gen. Leonard Wood and former governor-general W. Cameron Forbes. The mission report came out in late 1921 and served as the backbone of American policy, more so because Wood subsequently became governor general in September 1921. The report scarcely mentioned the PNB situation, but it became a major focus of the Wood administration as many of the sugar centrals were placed on receivership after loans with the bank were foreclosed.

In another scholarly article I wrote in 2014 for the De La Salle University's *Asia Pacific Social Science Review* entitled "The Politics and Economics of Recovery in Colonial Philippines in the Aftermath of World War 1, 1918-1923," I explained that the conflict between governor-general Wood and Filipino politicians that erupted into the so-called Cabinet Crisis of 1923 (when the entire Filipino Cabinet members of the Wood administration resigned from their posts) was partly a product of the chief executive's determination to sell the sugar centrals (among other assets) to American businessmen during the early 1920s. This was a thorny issue for Filipinos because the conventional wisdom post-Jones Law of 1916 resolutely held that Philippine independence could be derailed by greater American private business interests in the archipelago.

■ Then president Manuel L. Quezon with national assembly speaker Jose Yulo. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

■ Then president Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and vice president Fernando Lopez. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Then Senate president Manuel Quezon pushed for Filipino private ownership of key economic interests in the country, and in the absence of Filipino capitalists, he said these should be under government control. Key national economic interests should never be turned over to private American hands to ensure the immediate granting of Philippine independence from the United States. Thus, Wood's push to sell off the sugar centrals to American private business entities was deemed by Quezon as a direct threat to Philippine independence.

This situation created an irresistible opportunity for the unholy marriage between ambitious political entrepreneurs and shrewd economic interests in the country, one that profitably persisted for many decades afterwards. The sugar industry's recurring moral hazard leaned on steadfast government support, and the wealthy cash-crop barons were obligated to bankroll the ambitions of top politicians.

However, the sugar industry towers over the other cash crops in the sense that it was able to send many of its members into the highest echelons of politics in the country, while the other industries were content with providing financial backing for powerful political figures. Probably the most successful of these sugar barons was Fernando Lopez, brother of ABS-CBN's Eugenio. He twice served as the country's vice president: from 1949-1953 under President Elpidio Quirino and from 1965-1973 under President Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.

Lopez was also a senator from 1947-1949 and from 1953-1965.

Another prominent sugar industry politician was Jose Yulo, who served as speaker of the National Assembly before the war, congressman and senator (briefly), as well as secretary of justice (in the 1930s and in the 1960s), associate justice and chief justice of the Supreme Court.

BusinessMirror
A broader look at today's business

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Moving toward high-value industries and higher-paying jobs

Sonny M. Angara

BETTER DAYS

OVER the past three years, I have been advocating for a transformation among our industries—from one that produces common, low-value goods to one that churns out complex, high-value products. We dubbed this Tatak Pinoy ("Proudly Filipino"), which embodies our vision and ambition to see Philippine industries, entrepreneurs, professionals, workers, artisans and farmers becoming globally competitive so that the country can export more complex, high-value products and services.

Take for instance mangoes. The Philippines is known to produce some of the world's best mangoes and these are exported to various destinations. But more than just the fruits themselves, the country is also exporting processed mangoes in the form of dried mangoes and even candy. Unlike the fresh fruits, the processed mangoes last longer and can easily be transported to even more destinations that do not impose restrictions on the entry of certain agricultural products.

Another example would be semiconductors. This segment of the electronics sector remains as the top export for the Philippines. These include integrated circuits, diodes and transistors that are being used by manufacturers around the world for the production of complex, high-value products that eventually end up being imported by the Philippines for domestic consumption. What can be done so that we export, instead of import, these high-value products?

In 2020, we exported $106 billion worth of products. Imports, on the other hand, reached $130 billion, resulting in an overall trade deficit in goods and services. If we look at our Asean neighbors, most of them are already posting trade surpluses. Vietnam for one has moved to an export-led economy while Indonesia has focused its efforts towards industrialization. During a hearing conducted by the Committee on Trade, Commerce and Entrepreneurship last week, the Department of Trade and Industry noted that while the Philippine economy is growing, there is still a huge reliance on imports of commodities such as steel, cement and petroleum that all contribute to the deficit in our balance of trade.

I raised this question to the DTI: Is this a sustainable direction for us as a country or do we want to reverse this? We need to find out if we are on the right track in terms of producing higher-paying jobs and higher-value industries. If the data shows we are not, then we have to reverse track at some point.

This is what we are trying to achieve with our Tatak Pinoy advocacy. Through our office, we are rallying the public and private sector to achieve these goals: providing support to priority industries; helping create more high quality and globally competitive products and services; promoting Philippine products and services under a brand of quality to encourage global demand; highlighting the ingenuity, creativity, and innovativeness of Philippine workers, craftsmen, laborers and professionals; encouraging job-generating investments—both local and foreign; creating a new generation of highly-skilled Filipinos who are well-prepared for today's fast changing world; reversing the phenomenon of brain drain; spurring innovation and encouraging active collaboration between the government, academe, and the private sector; pursuing legislation whenever appropriate; and instilling pride and optimism in every Filipino about the Philippines. This is all about making "Proudly Made in the Philippines" a compelling brand and value proposition that is well-known across the world.

It was very encouraging to hear DTI Secretary Fred Pascual echoing our views and recognizing the need to move towards industrialization in order to sustain the growth of our economy and make it more inclusive. Sec. Pascual hit the nail on the head when he said that providing stable, better quality and higher paying jobs for our people is the only way to reduce, if not eliminate the constant exodus of talent to other countries and cut down our reliance on OFW remittances as a way to prop up our economy, which he said is unsustainable.

The bottom line is that we need to strengthen our industries, move them up the value chain so that we can produce more jobs and increase the incomes of our people. We need a whole of government approach and have a laser-like focus on this effort in order to achieve results. The DTI should take the lead and meet with our manufacturers to determine why they are not occupying higher producing product spaces. If they say they lack the skilled manpower or technology or partners, then there should be a corresponding push from the Department on this front.

We should look in this direction of having more higher paying jobs and higher value products. Our GDP per capita has been increasing but only incrementally. If we're looking for more dramatic increases, we need to make changes in this direction.

Senator Sonny Angara has been in public service for 18 years—9 years as Representative of the Lone District of Aurora, and 9 as Senator. He has authored and sponsored more than 250 laws. He is currently serving his second term in the Senate.

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Salt in our tears and other thoughts

HUMAN FACE

MA. CERES P. DOYO

Pan de sal, the Filipino breakfast and *merienda* staple—with *palaman* or without—was the first to pop up in my mind. (*Sal* is Spanish for salt.) Next was the biblical saying on becoming "the salt of the earth" and what that entailed. Then the saying "back to the salt mines."

Troubled by recent reports that our archipelagic home floating between azure sky and azure sea, the so-called Pearl of the Orient, could soon be short of salt (sodium chloride or NaCl), I posted on a chat group that I was writing this column titled the above—salt in our tears. I was just heaving a sigh of disbelief.

A friend of gentle spirit sent a swift reply aimed at the solar plexus: "How do we extract salt from our tears? If we can do that, perhaps there will be sufficient salt because of the amount of tears that have flowed from the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the Red-tagged, and from those who've had untimely deaths among them. We have so much sea water around us and we're running out of salt? *Totoo 'yan, yung iba nga naubos na ang luha* (It is true that some have no more tears.)"

Indeed, it is the irony of ironies. Some years back, it was garlic, then rice and *galunggong* fish, and recently, white onions, then sugar, and now salt that will be hard to come by if not more expensive. Often, the knee-jerk reaction is to import. (Haven't we learned from imported cheap rice and the tariffication move that would drive farmers to penury?)

But sadly, the Philippines has been importing staples for our tables, rice specifically, which had been this country's main produce in centuries past. Decades ago, so many Thais were studying here to become top-notch agriculturists in their home country. Now, Thailand is one of our sources of imported rice, while Vietnam, whose countryside had been practically rendered infertile with napalm bombs and Agent Orange by US forces, has risen from the ashes of war to become a rice-exporting country.

Our agricultural country now imports food that we ourselves could grow or produce. Why? While salt is not food per se, it is a food additive and preservative, an ingredient for many purposes, among them culinary, industrial, agricultural, even medical and pharmaceutical. It is even used for cloud seeding to make rain.

On the culinary side, less salt could mean healthier eating for the hypertensive, which is the same in the case of sugar for the diabetics. But that is another story.

So while the Senate was investigating whether or not the importation order for sugar was official and legit, and whether or not there is a real sugar shortage, salt suddenly dashed from behind to call attention.

If ours is indeed a valley of tears, as my friend imagines our country to be, then we should figuratively be swimming in salt. Tears are salty because salt, in some form, is present in our tears. Any ophthalmologist will tell you that. That is as far as the metaphor goes. Not to forget that we are physically and literally right smack in the Pacific Ocean, where our tears from the valley blend with the wide blue expanse from which we can extract mountains of salt to flavor our lives without importing.

There are fancily named imported salt in select groceries. "Artisanal," they are called—pink Himalayan, kosher, etc. While ours are simply labeled "Fidel-ized," meaning iodized. Fidel stands for "fighting iodine deficiency law." I am told that this was a setback for some small salt producers who did not have the iodizing know-how and gave up their backyard livelihood for something else.

When I visited Pangasinan months ago, I went to the market (as I am wont to do when I go places) to buy *takal* salt, un-iodized. So did my friends. Most backyard salt making in Pangasinan are done by boiling sea water, which has natural iodine in it.

By the way, the famous Salt Spring of Nueva Viscaya of Geography class is no more, the result of geological changes. I was a child when I saw for the first time a rock of mineral salt called *tultul* which, I was told, flavored the rice when food was scarce during the Japanese occupation. I remember seeing from the car window the wide expanse of white gleaming in the sun like snow, the small human figures with wooden rakes slowly disappearing from view. Those were the salt beds and salt makers of yesteryears.

Send feedback to cerespd@gmail.com

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NEWS IN A FLASH
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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

ECHOES FROM

JOHNNY DAYANG

The comfort of import

There is a mountain of literature saying redundantly that the Philippines is a rich country. But that's as far as impressions can go. In truth, Filipinos have been infinitely exposed to the scourge of bureaucratic misconduct that has made it an archipelago so dependent on im-ports.

Our reliance on imports has devastated much of our worth as an agricultural country. As industrial development seeps in, more of the farmlands has given way to horizontal advanc-es. Fields that feed us staples and lands that have stuffed our markets with spices, cash crops, and veg-gies have become concrete jungles.

Even the focus to enhance agrarian growth has been stalled. In schools, students are ori-ented towards earn-ing a degree and getting a lucrative job but nowhere is there a strong thrust towards agribusiness and farming. While education looks at the brighter side of things, losing the value of agriculture side-steps development.

In big part affected by de-mographic advance and in-dustrialization, even the for-estlands that have provided the nation with natural re-sources are not spared from the spread of pro-gress. Farms that were proudly declared as rice granaries have become residential hubs, and remote farming communities that fed the marketplace with abundant farm produce are now crisscrossed by concrete highways that further con-tribute to the decimation of agriculture.

Since the first Marcos dis-pensation, the comfort of im-port was already an issue. To ad-dress the rice shortage, the government even launched the Masagana '99 program. But by the way the undertak-ing was nurtured, it did not provide positive returns.

The decay in the country's agricultural output and our ugly reliance on import have be-come pervasive in the last half a century. Aside from rice, fish, onions, sugar, and salt, to name a few, have infil-trated the local market almost without restraint. With smug-glers revel-ing their halcyon days in collusion with corrupt customs people, imported ar-ticles have flooded the souks that were once dominated by domestic farm produce.

Being swamped with im-ports is a risk to social and economic headways. Worse, with the challenge of cli-mate change being taken for granted, farm productivity, which used to be ad-equate, needs an immediate damage control. In the absence of keys that mitigate the risks from imports, the certainty of seeing the collapse of the country's agriculture, unless drastic measures are intro-duced, is almost a foregone conclusion.

Without the State admitting it, the heavy influx of imports is not just about overspending on dollars; it is also a dire re-flection on how misguided our priorities have become when it comes to protecting the country's production levels from dependence on foreign products.

Malaya
Business Insight

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Corn drops; wheat eases

SINGAPORE- Chicago corn, wheat and soybeans slid on Thursday, as growing concerns over global economic slowdown weighed on commodity markets, although losses were limited by hot weather conditions curbing US and European crop prospects.

The most-active corn contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.3 percent at $6.68-1/4 a bushel, as of 0320 GMT. The contract was set for a third consecutive day of losses.

Soybeans also lost 0.3 percent to $14.18 a bushel, after three sessions of losses. Meanwhile, wheat gave up 0.1 percent to $8.30-1/2 a bushel.

Global markets are being weighed down by fears of recession, which dragged down stocks and commodities.

Asian stocks slid and the dollar spiked on Thursday following concerns about aggressive rate hikes from global policymakers.

Oil prices also fell in early Asian trade on Thursday, led lower by increased supply and worries that the global economy could slow further with renewed restrictions to curb COVID-19 in China.

However, expectations of lower US production are supporting corn prices. Advisory service Pro Farmer last week estimated the US corn yield at 168.1 bushels per acre, well below the USDA's forecast of 175.4. The Pro Farmer harvest projection followed a four-day Midwest crop tour that showed the effects of hot, dry weather in some areas.

For soybeans, Pro Farmer predicted US crop of 4.535 billion bushels, close to the USDA's August forecast of 4.531 billion bushels.

For corn and wheat futures, worries about shipments from war-torn Ukraine are likely to support prices. Grain silos in Ukraine's second-biggest port, Mykolaiv, were hit by Russian shelling of the city on Tuesday, causing a fire that was still burning on Wednesday, Ukraine's emergencies service said. - ***Reuters***

BusinessMirror
A broader look at today's business
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Vegetable prices spike in flood-hit Pakistan amid looming food crisis

LAHORE, Pakistan — Vegetable and fruit prices have soared in markets across Pakistan as devastating rains ruin crops and disrupt supplies, an early sign of how the worst floods in decades are creating food shortages at a time of financial crisis.

Pakistan's 220 million people are already facing rampant inflation, with consumer prices up 24.9% year-on-year in July. The economy is in turmoil, with fast-depleting foreign reserves and a record depreciation of the rupee against the US dollar.

That leaves the country particularly vulnerable as it counts the cost of extreme monsoon rains through August that have killed more than 1,100 people.

Damage to homes and infrastructure will run into billions of dollars, while losses in the key farming sector have yet to be fully assessed.

In the eastern city of Lahore, close to the border with India and far from the worst floods in Sindh province, prices of some vegetables have tripled.

"Last week, I sold onions for 90 rupees a kg and today the government price is 300 per kg," said vegetable seller Ahmad Ali. The Pakistani government sets prices for some fresh produce, although traders often ignore the guidelines.

Tomatoes and onions are among the most common ingredients in Pakistani cooking, and tens of thousands of tons of each are consumed each month.

"The supply of vegetables and fruit to Lahore is getting lower day by day because of the flood, rains and destruction to roads," said Malik Salim Awan, a supplier at Lahore's fruit and vegetable market.

"Before the current scenario, we were receiving over 100 trucks (of fresh produce) daily. Now, we receive 10 to 15 trucks only," Awan said.

Officials say that more than two million acres (809,371 hectares) of agricultural land have been flooded, destroying most standing crops and preventing farmers from sowing new ones.

WAREHOUSES EMPTYING

Hundreds of kilometers (miles) from Lahore, people must clear up flooded homes at the same time as worry about where the next meal will come from.

"Tomatoes were 60 rupees a kg, and now they are more than 200 ... even the price of flour is double now," said Sain Bukash Husain, 20, whose home in the village of Garhi Yasin in the southern province of Sindh has been badly damaged.

"What can we do?"

Sindh, with a population of 50 million, has been hardest hit, with 697 mm of rain thus far in the monsoon period, or 466% above the 30-year monsoon average. Pakistan as a whole has seen nearly 190% more rain than the 30-year average.

In Dera Ismail Khan, in central Pakistan along the Indus River, warehouses storing vegetables are already emptying out.

The government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is scrambling to secure supplies.

"The rice crop has been washed away," Sharif told reporters after visiting northern Pakistan. "Fruit and vegetables are gone." He said flood waters had swept away 700,000 livestock.

Pakistan's agrarian sector powers the economy and feeds the people, accounting for more than a fifth of the country's output, employing up to 40% of the workforce and producing goods worth around $80 billion annually.

Commerce Minister Naveed Qamar said on Wednesday that the government was close to an agreement to import vegetables and other edible goods from Iran and Afghanistan, and an urgent request had gone to the cabinet to approve it.

"Prices are up already. If you go to buy onions you wouldn't get it. If you go to buy tomatoes you will get it at a much higher price," Qamar told a news conference, citing the fallout of the floods. — ***Reuters***