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## PBBM cited for signing Emancipation Law

By MARIO B. CASAYURAN

Senators Francis Joseph "Chiz" G. Escudero, Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go, and Cynthia A. Villar lauded President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. on Saturday, July 8, for the expeditious signing of Republic Act 11953, the New Agrarian Emancipation Law.

"This is a historic day for our agrarian reform beneficiaries and a major leap forward for our agricultural sector," said Go, a member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and co-sponsor and co-author of Senate Bill No. 1850 - the Senate version of RA 11953.

Go had underscored the necessity of condoning agrarian reform-related debts. He also pushed for the provision of a better support mechanism for the country's agricultural workers.

"Forgiving their debts is just one aspect of the solution," Go said.

"We are not saying that our food supply will be secure simply because their loans have been written off. They need further support from the government, more agricultural input to make them more competitive," he added.

Escudero said that RA 11953 would provide financial relief to thousands of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries who are struggling to make ends meet, "let alone pay the amortization, interests, penalties, and other surcharges on lands they have acquired under the CARP (Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program)."

"I thank President Marcos for prioritizing the needs of vulnerable populations in the agriculture sector. With this law, our farmers and their beneficiaries are being offered a fresh start, a way out in a cycle of debt and poverty," Villar, principal sponsor of the measure, said.

Villar stressed that condoning farmers' amortization "will provide them much-needed financial resources that shall help them develop their farms, increase their productivity, and advance an agriculture-driven economy to accelerate rural development and promote food security."

The chairperson of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food,

and Agrarian Reform said farmers and farm workers have been anticipating the enactment of the measure that would make their dream of receiving their land titles possible.

"Without land in their name, our farmers cannot access credit as they lack collateral to secure the same," Villar said.

"This law will help alleviate the plight of ARBs, who are farmers; for them to recover and overcome the fallout of the Covid-19 crisis, the devastating African swine fever, the ongoing avian influenza, the increasing cost of fertilizer, fuel, and other farm inputs, and climate change," Villar said.

The law frees over 600,000 farmer-beneficiaries of the CARP from debts tied to land reform sponsored by the State. The law condones all loans incurred by ARBs, including interests, penalties, and surcharges.

Currently, up to 610,054 ARBs owe the Landbank of the Philippines a total of ₱57.56 billion in loans. This covers 1,173,101.575 hectares of agrarian reform lands.

RA 11953 condones all the unpaid amortizations of the principal debt, including interests and surcharges, if any, incurred by the ARBs. A total of ₱57.56 billion unpaid principal debt will be condoned to benefit 610,054 ARBs tilling 1.173 million hectares of land.

The government will also assume the obligation of some 10,201 ARBs tilling 11,531.24 hectares of land to pay the remaining balance of the direct compensation due to the concerned landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer or the Direct Payment Scheme amounting to ₱206,247,776.41.

Condonation frees the awarded lands from all mortgage liens in favor of the national government. The law also exempts ARBs from the payment of estate taxes.

ARBs who have fully paid their agrarian debt will be given priority of access to credit facilities and support services and shall be automatically included in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture or RSBSA of the Department of Agriculture (DA), thereby entitling them to all support services given to farmers by the department and other government agencies.



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## PBBM action vs onion cartel, smuggling hailed

SENATOR Christopher "Bong" Go expressed his support for President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s directive for the conduct of a thorough investigation into the alleged onion cartel as well as the smuggling and hoarding of agricultural products.

"I commend President Marcos for his decisive action to address the issue of hoarding, smuggling, and price fixing of agricultural commodities," Go said in reference to the President's directive to the Department of Justice and the National Bureau of Investigation to launch a thorough investigation.

Go stressed the importance of protecting the interests of local farmers and consumers and said "these unlawful practices have severe consequences for our farmers and the general public, particularly the poor."

He said there is a need to put an end to the manipulative tactics employed by the onion cartel, which led to a significant surge in onion prices and negatively affected the consumers' purchasing power and the livelihood of farmers.

"It is crucial to hold those responsible accountable for their actions. Our farmers work hard to provide for our nation, and they should not be exploit-



Senator Bong Go

ed by unscrupulous individuals seeking to profit at their expense. We must ensure that justice is served," he said.

"Napakaimportante ng food security. Huwag natin hayaang may nang-sasamantala lalo na sa sektor ng agrikultura kung saan nakasalalay ang kabubuhay ng maraming kababayan. Importante na may laman ang tiyan ng mga tao lalo na mga mahihirap," he added.

Go stressed the need for collaboration among different government agencies and enforcement bodies to ensure a comprehensive and efficient inquiry. He said there is a need for coordination and pooling of resources to swiftly bring the perpetrators to justice.

"Cooperation among relevant agencies is essential in dismantling the cartel and curbing smuggling activities effectively," Go said.

"We must work together to protect our farmers, stabilize prices, and safeguard the welfare of our consumers," he added.

Previously, Go stressed the importance of apprehending and prosecuting those involved in smuggling activities that allow them to sell onions at higher prices. Invoking the Anti-Smuggling Law, he cited the need to impose stricter penalties, including imprisonment, on offenders who exploit the market and violate the established price ceiling.

Citing the crucial role of farmers in ensuring food security, Go has been consistently pushing for stronger agricultural support systems and infrastructure.

He was one of the authors of the measure that became Republic Act No. 11901, expanding the agriculture, fisheries, and rural development financing system. He has also been advocating for other programs to support farmers and fisherfolks in the country, such as the enhancement of the irrigation of farmlands and expansion of the National Rice Program.



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## Taming the food inflation monster

The monster has been tamed, though not yet slayed. At last, we are now reaping the benefits of all those audacious policy rate hikes of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) the past year.

Inflation has eased to a one-year low of 5.4 percent last month and is expected to ease further in the coming months.

Former BSP Gov. Felipe Medalla, the inflation slayer, led the BSP in raising rates in his one year stint, including that jumbo hike of 75 bps in July last year. Perhaps, if it were somebody else – say someone who was not “better than the incumbent” at the time – inflation may have gone through the roof.

It's now time for the Department of Agriculture (DA) to do more heavy lifting to tame food inflation.

For sure, this year's remaining two quarters will test the ability of the department, still led by President Marcos, to soften the impact of food inflation, which hurts the poorest of the poor most of all.

While food inflation at the national level continued to decelerate for the fifth consecutive month at 6.7 percent in June 2023, this is still above the 6.4 percent recorded in June 2022. Food inflation the previous month was recorded at 7.5 percent.

### Rice, pork, sugar

In the food hierarchy, three commodities must be tackled properly, as my go-to agriculture expert, Dr. Cristino “Resty” Collado, shared with me as we recently discussed our still prevalent agriculture problems.

Rice is top in the hierarchy, the mainstay in every Filipino meal. Before there were substitutes: pan de sal, cassava and corn grits, unlike now. Filipinos just love rice so much.

But Dr. Resty, president of the University of the Philippines Los Baños College of Agriculture and Food Science Alumni Association said, what's lacking now is an effective partnership with the farmers to boost rice productivity. The devolution of DA extension services to local government units has isolated the main DA office from the whole game.

As such, the DA and LGUs must work together, hand-in-glove, to intensify rice production because governors and mayors can make farm yields higher, he said.

“Politics has made their rapport with the farmers stronger and more effective. They can distribute seeds and fertilizer pistol style: direct to the target. They know who really needs assistance. The DA's distribution system, on the other hand, is shotgun style. Many sacks of certified seeds and fertilizers find their way back to where they were bought from,” Dr. Resty says.

Next in the food hierarchy is pork. Meat products, mainly pork and chicken, are the usual food items that most Filipinos complement with rice.



The price of pork is the lead barometer used to plan for family food budgets. Price of poultry and fish follow when prices of pork go up.

And then there's the bitter situation surrounding our sugar industry.

Sugar is also in the attention of inflation watchers. Isn't it sad that everyone seems fixated on marketing and trading of sugar when production has become a problem?

As it is now, the sugar industry is on the brink of extinction due to neglect and obsession for importation, so it would be good if the DA can work with the academe – UPLB for instance and other state universities – on how to increase production of sugar and other food products as well.

### Food security

Against this backdrop, how do we work on achieving food security? It must be an environment where food is available, accessible and affordable to everyone.

Dr. Resty believes the rice shortage has somehow eased. Republic Act No. 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law, which took effect in March 2019, replaced the quantitative restrictions on imported rice with tariffs of 35 percent to 40 percent and established the Rice Competitive Enhancement Fund (RCEF) funded by the tariff revenues.

The RCEF is an appropriation of P10 billion, collected from rice import tariffs, in six years or up to 2024 to fund programs to help farmers.

But what happens after 2024?

The key to an effective biosecurity enforcement is again a DA-LGU partnership, Dr. Resty says.

Like in the battlefield, DA's programs need generals but it's in the hands of the battalion and field commanders, in this case the LGU heads, to make the plan succeed.

They would also know which areas have rural folks who harbor infected animals or maybe smuggle goods, or which places need help the most.

And while we're at it, I also think of the question popped by esteemed Monetary Board member and agriculture expert Bruce Tolentino, in one of our chats – how do we achieve long-term objectives like increasing farm productivity and farmer competitiveness?

One way is to put more money behind productivity-enhancing measures instead of just putting the resources in addressing short-term price pressures.

There are many other ways to address our agriculture problems but at the end of the day, the solutions must involve the farmers – they who toil the land in the scorching heat to produce our food.

No single person or agency can tame the inflation monster; it must be a shared goal of the BSP and the DA and other agencies; and the DA and the LGUs and other stakeholders.

Otherwise, the more we ignore it, the more menacing and real it will become. And no, this isn't like those imaginary monsters under our bed at night when we were kids which simply disappear in the morning.



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## Sandiganbayan affirms DA budget officer's conviction

By CZARINA NICOLE ONG-KI

The Sandiganbayan has affirmed the conviction of former Department of Agriculture (DA) regional budget officer Lourdes V. Gonzales for graft in the irregular procurement of fertilizer and seeds in 2004.

Gonzales and former DA administrative officer Francisco C. Casil were convicted of graft and sentenced to six to 10 years imprisonment.

They were also barred perpetually from holding public office and ordered to reimburse the DA Regional Field Office 1 of ₱3.4 million, the money paid to Farmate International Technologies Inc. (FITI) and CLFAC for the 2,166 bottles of Farmate HMZ 2000 and 584 bottles of Algazinc Plus, respectively.

They were acquitted in two other graft charges for failure of the prosecution to prove their guilt.

Gonzales appealed her conviction. She told the court that her membership in the Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) does not by itself produce the crime of graft.

She pointed out that the evidence of the prosecution is "hearsay and inadmissible" because witnesses who had first-hand knowledge of the transactions did not testify.

But the Sandiganbayan said: "The arguments of accused Gonzales on the violation of Section 3(e) of Republic Act No. 3019 are without merit. These are the same issues and arguments that have already been considered and passed upon by the court."

The court pointed out that the public documents produced by the prosecution enjoy presumption of regularity and prima facie evidence of the facts stated.

It stressed that the trustworthiness of the public documents was given value because of the sense of official duty in the preparation of the statement made.

The court's four-page resolution dated July 7, 2023 was written by Associate Justice Karl B. Miranda with the concurrence of Sixth Division Chairperson Sarah Jane T. Fernandez and Associate Justice Kevin Narce B. Vivero.





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# Conserve water now

## PAGASA: Angat Dam drops below 180-meter minimum operating level

By ELLALYN DE VERA-RUIZ

**W**ater at Angat Dam fell below its minimum operating level of 180 meters on Saturday, July 8, based on the monitoring of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA).

In its dam information issued at 6 a.m., PAGASA said

Angat Dam's water level was down to 179.99 meters on July 8, from 180.45 meters on July 7.

Its current state is now below its 180-meter minimum operating level, and way below its 212-meter normal-high water level during the rainy season.

On Friday, July 7, the National Water Resources Board (NWRB) said it will reduce the allocation from Angat Dam if

water falls below the minimum operating level.

"If the dam's water level decreases below the minimum operating level of 180 meters, the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System will revert to its regular allocation of 48 cubic meters per second (cms) of water until the end of July from the current allocation of 50 cms," NWRB said in a statement. ► **5**



**GOING, GOING...** — Water at Angat Dam is shown reaching the minimum operating level of 180 meters in this photo taken in Barangay San Lorenzo, Norzagaray, Bulacan, on July 6, 2023. As of Saturday morning, July 8, 2023, the water level has further dipped to 179.99 meters. (Noel B. Pabalate)





## Conserve water now 1◀

"[Meanwhile,] the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) will have an allocation of up to 20 cms until the end of July. NIA has a current water allocation of up to 28.5 cms this month," it added.

Authorities have been calling on the public to take part actively in efforts to conserve water resources to mitigate the impacts of El Niño, a climate phenomenon that causes drier and warmer conditions in the country.

The NWRB suggested some water-saving techniques that can significantly help lessen the impacts of the El Niño, such as rainwater harvesting, reducing consumption, fixing leaks as soon as they are discovered, and optimizing irrigation systems.

PAGASA confirmed the presence of "weak" El Niño conditions over the equatorial Pacific early this month, with widespread effects on the country expected as early as October.

However, the likelihood that the El Niño will become a "moderate to strong" event has increased between the end of 2023 and early 2024.

### Farmers told to intensify planting

With the current situation, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said farmers should ramp up their agricultural production before the effects of El Niño sets in.

In a memorandum dated July 6, Agriculture Undersecretary for Rice Program Leocadio S. Sebastian directed the regional field offices and DA-affiliated agencies involved in farmer assistance to deliver fertilizer and seed assistance on a timely basis.

Citing the state weather bureau's advisory, he said the effects of El

Niño would be apparent as early as the fourth quarter of 2023. He noted that there will be favorable rice-growing conditions in the coming months with normal to above-normal amounts of rainfall but fewer occurrences of typhoons.

"By ramping up our production during the rainy season, we can mitigate the impact of the El Niño that is expected during the dry season cropping," Sebastian said.

He ordered regional executive directors (REDs) of Regions 1 to 13 and the CAR Field Office, the heads of the Philippine Rice Research Institute, the National Irrigation Administration, the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and

Mechanization and the Agricultural Training Institute to fast-track the provision of agricultural inputs and other interventions, such as seeds, fertilizers, biofertilizers, soil ameliorants, irrigation.

"The timely delivery of the inputs will support the favorable growing conditions this wet season, boosting overall productivity and cushioning the adverse effects of El Niño during the dry season," the memorandum said.

It is worth noting that even if PAGASA said that El Niño is now in the country, its effects on farms would not be felt right away and would take some time to reach those in non-irrigated areas.

As such, PAGASA predicted normal to above-normal rainfall for the months of June through September, but below-normal rainfall for the months of October through December.

Sebastian said the agriculture department is now identifying the areas that would be affected by El Niño, a cyclical phenomenon, which means areas affected during the 2016 and 2019 El Niño are likely to be affected again.

"Areas to be affected by El Niño during the dry season can plant crops like corn and mungbean, which require less water," the DA said. (With a report from Jel Santos)