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EYES WIDE OPEN

IRIS GONZALES

Bagong Pilipinas

The House, as I write this, is already on lockdown ahead of President Marcos' State of the Nation Address tomorrow, July 24.

How has it really been more than a year since the only son of Ferdinand Marcos took his oath as the 17th president of this republic?



Mid-afternoon on Monday, just before the sun sets over the country, we will hear what he has to say.

The lawmakers and their wives, in their best Barong Tagalog or signature suits and designer-made Filipiniana, will walk the red carpet and find their seats in the glittering plenary hall.

Outside, the dissidents will have their own state of the nation report, as they do year in and year out, one administration after another – high food prices, exorbitant oil prices, skyrocketing transport costs, persistent inflation, lack of jobs, human rights abuses. Malnutrition, too, and the poor quality of education.

Against this backdrop, the big question remains. What really is the state of our nation? Where are we heading indeed, this country of 114 million? Are we moving forward or just going around in circles and still finding our way between good times and bad and between upheavals and setbacks with no roadmap for long-term success?

Economic gains

More than a week ago at the historic and majestic 1929 Fairmont Royal York hotel in Canada, Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said the economy is growing and the momentum has been sustained.

"The Philippines has sustained comparatively remarkable growth over the past decade, with the country's GDP growth posting mostly between six percent and seven percent a year since 2010. While this was interrupted by numerous challenges faced during the height of the pandemic, our economy demonstrated resilience and strong recovery as we reached a full-year growth of 7.6 percent last year, surpassing the government's official target of 6.5 percent to 7.5 percent for 2022. The first quarter of 2023, as you have also heard, also delivered good news, as the economy maintained its high growth at 6.4 percent," he said.

The environment is better, the economic team said. There's no reason for foreign investors not to come and do business in the country, Sec. Balisacan said during the roadshow in Canada.

These are all positive developments of course. It was also good that early on, President Marcos put an end to COVID-19 related lockdowns. It was a good call because people needed to work.

A year into the administration, however, there's still so much that needs to be done. A lot of us are still waiting for more specific measures, beyond slogans and rebranding, that would really leave an impact on the lives of Filipinos, especially the fourth of the population who live below the poverty line.

Agriculture

What has happened to agriculture, the portfolio that Marcos himself leads? There are still so many agricultural industries that need to be revived.

Two weeks ago, President Marcos said vaccines for African swine fever (ASF) are forthcoming. This is good news but ASF vaccine availability is just one part. The government also needs to revive the swine industry.

How can this be achieved? The government needs to lower the cost of production. In pigs, around 78 percent of the total production cost goes to feeds. Thus, it is important to lower the cost of feeds, says agriculture expert. Dr. Cristino "Resty" Collado.

One way to do this is to make use of high-yielding varieties of corn – a raw material for making feeds – developed by the University of the Philippines Los Baños Institute of Plant Breeding.

Marcos, for his part, said his administration has to "undo" almost 40 years of "neglect," since this sector comprises the backbone of the nation's economy.

"We have done a lot of growth; we are beginning to see the systemic changes that are going to be part of the new bureaucracy. But there is still a long way to go," Marcos said.

Recently, he ordered the DA to study a proposal to set up silos to ensure a 30-day buffer stock of rice and corn in the country. This would offset the lean years of crop failures and harvest shortfalls.

This is a positive step but he also needs to go after the cartels and the smugglers in agriculture and other industries.

Corruption

In my view, corruption is the biggest problem that Marcos needs to address. This broken system of ours is just so impossibly broken that it has hindered our progress through the decades.

Baguio City Mayor Benjamin B. Magalong was right in asking, "Has corruption become the norm?"

"Are we not going to ask ourselves, is corruption now becoming a norm in government? Is good governance becoming an exception?"

"It is very saddening that they have a percentage in every project. They have not yet become tired. They already have a percentage. They are still the contractor. They are still the supplier," Magalong said, referring to some lawmakers and LGU executives.

Magalong voiced out what's on everyone's mind. When will it ever end?

What has President Marcos done to address this? Marcos 2.0 has five more years to fix these big problems and I fervently hope he does.

We all want lasting changes for this country we all claim to love. Bagong Pilipinas – why not? But it really needs to be a newer and better Philippines. Unfortunately, the problem lies deep and solutions need to be drastic. Slogans and propaganda blitz just won't be enough.

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★



The enduring friendship between PH, Japan

BY EDISON JOSEPH GONZALES

FORMER president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo signed Proclamation 905, declaring 2006 as Philippines-Japan Friendship Year. The enduring friendship between the Philippines and Japan was based on similar aspirations for liberty, justice and democratic values. The Philippines and Japan have been bound by a common vision of the future and have had close historical ties. Both countries have enjoyed a strong, vibrant relationship in trade, business, investment and tourism.

2006 was the most fitting time to celebrate and commemorate the diplomatic relations of the Philippines and Japan with the ratification of the Peace Treaty and Reparations Agreement on July 23, 1956.

Consequently, July 23, 2006 was declared as Philippines-Japan Friendship Day by virtue of Proclamation 854.

A very fruitful meeting with Japan PM

President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. had a very fruitful meeting with

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. Bound by shared values and common aspirations for the two countries' peoples, they committed to further strengthen the strategic partnership between the Philippines and Japan. They mapped out a transformative, future-oriented partnership that was responsive to new developments.

Marcos said they have cemented defense and security relations and have also covered a great deal of ground in the areas of agriculture, information and communications technology cooperation,



The Japanese prime minister lauds the 'further advancement' of communication with the Philippines in a historic meeting with President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



and with the signing of bilateral agreements that provided the framework for enhanced, mutually beneficial collaboration in many areas.

Japan committed to provide infrastructure development loans for two major projects — the North-South Commuter Railway for Malolos-Tutuban and the North-South Commuter Railway Project Extension — all totaling 377 billion yen or the equivalent of about \$3 billion.

The completion of these projects, along with other ongoing large-scale Official Development Assistance projects such as the Metro Manila Subway Project and many more across the country, were expected to translate to better lives for Filipinos through improved facilitation of the movement of people, goods and services.

"During this visit to Japan, I also met with business leaders and potential investors. In our roundtable meetings, I briefed them on the new and better business climate and investment environment in the Philippines," Marcos added.

Key private sector representatives were with Marcos and engaged with Japanese industry giants to seize the economic opportunities now present in the Philippines. Coming back, Marcos added they carried with them over \$13 billion in contributions and pledges, created approximately 24,000 jobs and further solidified the foundations of the economic environment.

"I also talked to the CEOs (chief executive officers) of Japanese shipping companies and associations. This was very important as Japan has the second largest maritime industry in the world and they employ 31,673 Filipino seafarers. That number constitutes 70 percent of the maritime crew of the Japanese shipowners," Marcos shared.

The Japanese shipping companies also had investments and long-term partnerships with Philippine stakeholders in maritime education and welfare programs.

Marcos had the honor of having an imperial audience with Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako of Japan.

Regarding his audience with the emperor and empress,

Marcos said, "We reaffirmed the commitment that we have to enhance the close friendship and cultural ties between Filipinos and Japanese."

More investments would go to the Philippines on top of the deals signed during the President's successful working visit to Tokyo.

Japan to render dynamic support

Japan would provide dynamic support in helping a long-time ally, the Philippines, to attain Upper Middle-Income Country (UMIC) status by 2025 while supporting the administration of Marcos in a wide range of areas of cooperation.

The Japanese prime minister said this would be achieved through the active contribution of the Official Development Assistance and private-sector investment of 600 billion yen in the Japanese fiscal years from 2022 to 2023.

The Asian leaders also reaffirmed their distinct, continued commitment to facilitating the steady implementation of ongoing and future economic cooperation projects through the High-Level Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation toward the Philippines' attainment of UMIC status and beyond.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Kishida also expressed Japan's intention to contribute to the development of quality transport infrastructure in the Philippines in light of the Build, Better, More program of the Marcos administration as well as equitable regional development in the Philippines, including Mindanao.

The Japanese official also expressed support for President Marcos' priority agenda to maintain the competitiveness of Philippine agriculture and to achieve food security while increasing farm productivity, efficiency and farmers' income.

"[The] Philippines is Japan's neighbor across the ocean and is a strategic partner, sharing fundamental values. [A] discussion was held with President Marcos on bilateral cooperation on economy, security and defense, and people-to-people exchange, and deepening of cooperation in wide-ranging areas were strongly affirmed," Kishida said.

July 23, 2006 was
declared as Philippines-
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Proclamation 854.



Opposition bares Sona wish list

By Melvin Gascon
and Julie M. Aurelio
@Team_Inquirer

Ahead of President Marcos' second State of the Nation Address (Sona) on Monday, Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel III sought an explanation on what the government intends to do with the high cost of goods, unemployment and corruption.

In a statement on Saturday, Pimentel said Filipinos deserve the "unfiltered truth" during Mr. Marcos address with "no room for sugarcoating or glossing over the harsh realities facing the entire nation."

"The cost of living is very high. The income of the typical

Filipino family is not enough for their basic needs and for their decent existence as a family of human beings," he said.

Explain sugar scandal

"Many are unemployed and many more are underemployed, and those working, though employed, are not paid 'living wages,'" Pimentel added.

The opposition leader demanded an explanation for the "scandal that rocked" the **Sugar Regulatory Administration**.

According to Pimentel, the President's second Sona should spotlight the high cost of living, inadequate income, problems with education, unemployment and underemployment and the



Aquilino Pimentel III

ballooning national debt.

"The Philippines faces a lot of problems and challenges. The Filipino people have different difficulties and varied interests," he said.

While macroeconomic figures are important, the Presi-



France Castro

dent's Sona should concentrate on microeconomic matters, which concern and affect the lives of the ordinary Filipino, Pimentel said.

"We need to get our acts together as problem-solvers. We

need to act in good faith out of love for the country. We need to want a just, fair and safe society," he said.

'Take stance vs Red-tagging'

For House Deputy Minority Leader Rep. France Castro of Alliance of Concerned Teachers party list group, Mr. Marcos should make a "clear and unequivocal statement" against Red-tagging.

Castro stressed that it was "high time" that those engaging in Red-tagging should be held accountable.

"Red-tagging has serious consequences for individuals who are unjustly targeted. It creates an atmosphere of fear and intimid-

ation, stifling dissent and critical voices," she said on Saturday.

Castro added: "The President must take a strong stance against Red-tagging and ensure that all government entities actively work to put an end to this practice in his second Sona."

The lawmaker also pressed her colleagues in Congress to support legislative measures that will criminalize Red-tagging and protect individuals who are victims of Red-tagging.

There are two House bills on criminalizing Red-tagging that have been pending before the House justice committee since 2022. INQ



DENSO
Crafting the Core

DENSO PH to boost local agri through automation in Batangas Smart AgriTech Farm

by ADAM LAURENA

It had been almost a year since DENSO Philippines Corporation (DNPH) began operations for its P60 million hydroponic Smart AgriTech Farm in Ibaan, Batangas. The Ibaan farm serves as a showcase for the company's ongoing research on automation & Internet of Things (IoT) in the local agriculture industry while producing quality vegetables and fruits.

A global automotive manufacturer with corporate headquarters in the city of Kariya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, DENSO PH has been known to manufacture and

supply high-technology automotive parts to well-known Japanese, American, and European brands globally.

Now, venturing into the world of agriculture, DNPH aims to provide innovative solutions to the agricultural challenges the Philippines has faced throughout the years.

Quality crops have been growing in the Batangas Smart AgriTech Farm as these are housed in climate, and pest resilient greenhouses utilizing agriculture's best practices with DNPH strengths in manufacturing like Kaizen mind set, following Job Instruction Sheet (JIS), Inventory & Production control planning, data analysis

and other Japanese manufacturing practice that will professionalize PH agriculture. Moreover, crops are commercially grown through recirculating hydroponic technology, a process that substitutes soil with coco peats to grow crops. Through this, water remains in the farm's system and gets reused.

The farm will also minimize the use of chemicals. Doing so decreases its carbon footprint, with DNPH actively researching how it can engage in carbon credits trading in the near future.

DNPH, with its partner DENSO TECHNO Phils (DTPH) who provides software solutions, will further improve on the innovation and modernization of Philippine agriculture through a prototype testing of its Automation and IoT system. Firstly, it will be the Auto Dosing system dubbed as Autodose 1



Yuji Torii, president of DENSO Philippines Corporation (DNPH).



DNPH has collaborated with the Department of Agriculture regarding initiatives for the Smart AgriTech Farm to boost local agriculture.



Climate-resilient greenhouses will house the growing crops of the Smart AgriTech Farm.

which will be used to control and manage irrigation, nutrient and pH levels, as well as log data trends and set alarms when parameters go off the standard. The company intends for the system to be low-cost so it will be affordable to local farmers, especially those whose farm size is two hectares and below.

DNPH describes this as

a pioneer product that will boost small-scale farming in the country. The automation and IoT system it's currently developing aims to support Filipino farmers in better managing their farms through data analysis, enabling them to increase productivity, and consequently, their income.

Apart from these innovative farming solutions, a unique point of the Batangas Smart AgriTech Farm is its post-harvest facility wherein qual-

ity control and packaging are done using returnable packaging. Cold-chain technology is also used to transport crops, minimizing post-harvest losses while maintaining freshness. These procedures ensure that clients will get goods of only superior quality.

High-value crops are truly essential in supporting urban farming activities in the Philippines, and DNPH fully supports that through its hydroponic Smart AgriTech Farm

that can address not only the issues of farmers in the country but the low supply of vegetables and food security.

Truly an innovative approach in the realm of local agriculture, DNPH Smart AgriTech Farm, through its vision of a food secure and resilient Philippines, will surely provide the agrarian and nourishment needs of our countrymen and improve the welfare of our local farmers.



A farmer combining agriculture best practices with DENSO's manufacturing expertise, embracing a Kaizen mindset, and adhering to Job Instruction Sheet (JIS) protocols.



DENSO Filipino Engineers developing AutoDose 1 (used to control and manage irrigation, nutrient and pH levels, as well as log data trends and set alarms when parameters go off the standard)



PhilRice crafts risk maps to mitigate El Niño impact

The Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), the research and development arm of Department of Agriculture, is designing risk maps to mitigate the impact of the looming El Niño phenomenon.

PhilRice's maps would detail which areas would possibly be hit again, thereby determining the planting calendar that could help minimize the adverse effect of the dry spell.

It would also map out all areas of the country that could be hit by the dry climate to guide local governments and regional field offices on the kind of interventions that would be needed in areas to be affected by El Niño.

To further aid farmers, PhilRice has been sending out to farm communities around the country its "Be Water Smart" magazine containing information of varieties and ways to optimize water use to mitigate the impact of El Niño.

PhilRice magazine's "Be Water Smart" issue has put together and simplified information based on research and best practices to mitigate the effects of El Niño, PhilRice deputy director for development Karen Barroga said.

The magazine also contains previous experiences of farmers, particularly on how they coped with calamities and adverse weather conditions, thereby enriching the knowledge of other farmers on what to expect and how to cope with El Niño.

In addition, it has information on seed varieties that are heat or drought tolerant and under what soil conditions they can be planted, including the experience

of Vietnam in using climate-smart maps to address its drought problem.

Barroga said the agency has also been disseminating satellite-based data of rice area, production and yield to local government units and DA regional field offices so that they can be adequately guided on how to adjust their cropping calendars and on what interventions to give.

These data were weather patterns obtained and analyzed by the Philippine Rice Information System (PRISM) team.

Findings are given to LGUs and their extension workers and DA regional field officers so they can adequately guide farmers on seed varieties to plant based on available water supply.

PRISM is the first rice monitoring system in Southeast Asia that uses satellite imagery and information and communication technology, crop modeling and smart phones.

It has a network of focal persons nationwide who are tasked to validate satellite data and help disseminate these to policy and decision makers, who in turn transmit them to farmers either through extension workers or using call/text digital technology.

Through PRISM, the extent of standing crops and the different crop stages all over the country can also be known. Historical data of PRISM can be analyzed in determining how and when to adjust the planting calendar.

These are the data that inform us how to adjust the schedule of planting so that the crops would not be hit by typhoons, Barroga said.

- Danessa Rivera



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Villar pushes border facility vs agricultural diseases

By MARIO B. CASAYURAN

Diseases detrimental to the country's agricultural sector can be avoided with the establishment of a border facility to inspect and examine imported meat, fisheries, and other agricultural products entering the Philippines, Sen. Cynthia Villar, chairperson of the Senate Agriculture and Food Committee, said.

Villar and Department of Agriculture (DA) Undersecretary Domingo Pangniban led the groundbreaking ceremony of the Commodity Examination Facility for Agriculture (CEFA) in Angat, Bulacan recently.

"This is the first, and we hope that we will be at the groundbreaking ceremonies of the other two more inspection facilities to be put up in Cebu and Davao," Villar said.

She said the groundbreaking and the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for the establishment of the nation's very first border control facility is "a milestone for our country."

She said the construction of CEFA, a state-of-the-art facility, is in compliance with the Food Safety Act of 2013 or Republic Act (RA) 10611.

"The lack of adherence to the Food Safety Act of 2013 has led to the inadequate management of the African Swine Fever (ASF) challenge, and created a risk of other diseases in livestock entering the Philippines," Villar said.

"This compromises the quality and safety of food products, endangers consumer health, and undermines the reputation of the agricultural industry," she added.

With the CEFA that would enforce stricter rules and ensure a thorough

examination of agricultural cargo, the risk of diseases and other potential threats would be minimized, Villar said.

"This would contribute to safer food products for consumers and protect public health."

Through comprehensive examination and inspection protocols, Villar said CEFA would be a crucial tool in detecting and preventing the spread of diseases in livestock, reducing the likelihood of outbreaks.

This proactive approach would protect the agricultural sector and local communities from potential epidemics, ensuring the stability of food production, she emphasized.

Villar related that all developed countries have these facilities as part of their strengthened food safety and quarantine, inspection regulations.

The laboratory shall enable the immediate testing of samples from commodities suspected to carry animal, fish, or plant pests or diseases and other hazardous contents.

A crematorium will also be in place to ensure safe disposal of confirmed agricultural commodities with quarantine violations, if these commodities cannot be returned to port of origin.

Furthermore, Villar said a border facility would also help in preventing agricultural smuggling because the shipment shall undergo 100 percent inspection of farm commodities using not only human power but also modern technology.

The continued smuggling of agricultural products undercuts domestic producers and compromises our food safety and our revenue collections which otherwise should fund social services for the benefit of our people, she stressed.



SM City Naga



SM City Roxas

A Founder's Dream: Urban Farming and the SM Foundation

This Urban Farming initiative is led by the SM Foundation through its Kabalikatan Sa Kabuhayan on Sustainable Agriculture Program (KSK-SAP). It's about uplifting the farmer community, fostering environmental consciousness, food security, and creating livelihood and income opportunities for marginalized urban communities. Through the KSK-SAP, a comprehensive program of urban farming techniques, product development, marketing, and basic accounting are offered in strategically-located field schools.

The KSK program has successfully conducted over 260 sustainable agricultural trainings, benefiting a total of 28,550 farmers. These trainings have taken place in both rural and urban settings, where participants have been exposed to sustainable farming modules that promote the cultivation of nutritious, high-quality vegetables and fruits.

Partnering with the SM Foundation, SM Supermalls,

and SM Markets are the following government agencies; the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, the Department of Science and Technology, the Department of Tourism, and the Quezon City Government. Each government organization and LGU plays a vital role in maintaining the viability of the program, and so that no

stone is left unturned in ensuring its success.

As an example, the SM Foundation has brought SM Supermalls' and SM Markets into the picture so that as these urban farmers successfully harvest, they're given an opportunity to market and sell their produce at the Sunday Markets that are now being held in several malls across the nation. When the produce reaches a volume that goes beyond this Sunday marketing mechanism, the SM Markets offer other alternatives.

It's about creating integration and circularity so that a mini-economic ecosystem is realized. After all, it can't be about teaching them what and how to farm and then leaving them with no outlet with which to monetize this harvest. The SM Foundation creates these strategic partnerships so that true income opportunities become

part of the overall scenario.

Who would have thought that this vision of Henry Sy, Sr., back in 2007, would have been so uncanny in predicting the mounting problems and issues we face today in agriculture, sustainable food production, food security, and urban development? It's a vision and dream that those in the SM Foundation are very proud to carry on, and deliver.

SM is in the business of creating a sustainable environment. From being the first to consider renewable energy in mall buildings, to implementing energy-saving devices, we continue to meet significant sustainability milestones.

Join us as we commit to a more sustainable lifestyle at smgreenmovement.com and [#SMGreenMovement](https://twitter.com/SMGreenMovement)



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Globe bolsters PH agriculture's digital transformation

LEADING digital solutions platform Globe is bolstering the digitization initiatives of the Department of Agriculture by providing critical internet connectivity to select DA- Agricultural Training Institute (DA-ATI) regional centers nationwide.

This collaboration was highlighted by Globe's turnover of 609 modems with SIM cards and P609,000 worth of load cards to the DA-ATI, a donation valued at around P1.09 million.

The turnover was held at the recent "Pistang Ani ng Bayan: Harvest Festival and Field Day," an annual celebration marking a successful harvest season across various community gardens.

Globe's contribution supports the vital role of DA-ATI in providing training programs and advisory services to farmers, fisherfolk and agricultural extension workers.

Globe's assistance empowers DA-ATI

to conduct its mandate to modernize agricultural methods and techniques, thereby enhancing the livelihood of the agricultural community.

"As a company committed to helping build a digitally empowered Philippines, we are proud to support DA-ATI's relevant mission of transforming our agriculture sector. By providing the necessary digital infrastructure, we aim to strengthen capacity-building initiatives of DA-ATI, ensuring that our hardworking farmers and fisherfolk are equipped with the latest advancements in agricultural technology," said Globe Group Chief Sustainability and Corporate Communications Officer Yoly Crisanto.

ATI Director Remelyn Recoter spoke of the value of connectivity support for farmers, particularly those in remote areas.

"These tools will strengthen the country's end-to-end farming advisory



■ Present during the turnover ceremony are (from left) ATI Information Services OIC-Chief Joeven Calasagsag, ATI Assistant Director Antonieta Arceo, DA Assistant Secretary Jane Bacayo, Globe Sales Manager Anne Karen Supnet, and Globe Stakeholder Engagement and Management Head Miguel Martin Bermundo. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

services, equipping our farmers and fishers with tools to harness the power of information. This is most especially critical to those geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. We are certain that through continuous collaboration among key organizations, the digitalization of agriculture is possible," said

Recoter.

Globe's partnership with DA-ATI signifies its commitment to facilitating digital transformation across all sectors of society, ensuring inclusivity and equal access to digital resources.

For more information, visit <https://www.globe.com.ph/>.

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Pagpapababa ng presyo ng pagkain sunod na tutukan

Hinikayat ni Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri si Pangulong Bongbong Marcos na sunod na tutukan sa ikalawang taon nito ang mababang presyo ng pagkain sa bansa.

Ayon kay Zubiri, bilang ang Pangulo ang siyang Kalihim din ng Department of Agriculture (DA) ay kailangang matutukan na nito ang 'availability' at pagpapababa sa presyo ng pagkain.

Iminungkahi rin ng senador na palakasin ngayong taon ang sektor ng agrikultura sa bansa at tulungan ang ating mga magsasaka.

Idinagdag pa ng Senate President na kung mura ang presyo ng pagkain ay mas lalong mararamdaman ng mga Pilipino ang epekto rin ng pagbaba ng inflation na nasa 6.1 percent mula sa dating 8 percent.

Kung kailangan umano na mag-import ng murang pagkain sakaling kulangin ang suplay ay mahalagang ma-balanse ito upang maprotektahan ang interes ng mga magsasaka habang pinananatili ang mababang presyo ng pagkain.

Tiwala naman si Zubiri na kaya itong tugunan ng Pangulo sa tulong na rin ng kanyang mga mahuhusay na tauhan.

Paalala naman ng



Editor
Maria Edralyn L. Benedicto

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

REGIONS

Vanilla farming takes root in Sarangani

Young seafarer leaves life in the high seas to seek opportunity in propagating expensive spice

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS • FEARLESS VIEWS

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By Bong S. Sarmiento
@InqNational

MAITUM, SARANGANI—In this bucolic coastal town where swathes of rice, corn, banana, cacao and coconut farms dominate the agricultural landscape, a millennial has taken a great leap of faith by growing vanilla on a commercial scale in this humid region.

In his globe-trotting job as a seafarer, Melvin Awid, 29, stumbled on the prospects of vanilla during a brief stopover in Madagascar, an island-country off the southeastern coast of the African continent, just before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global order in early 2020.

Madagascar is the world's largest producer of vanilla.

"While anchored, I smelled the scent of vanilla from this laborer. It was so good that I got curious. Fortunately, he was kind and walked me through the basics of the vanilla plant," he told the Inquirer.

"Vanilla is a versatile crop.

It can be used in food, beverage and cosmetics," Awid noted.

Next to saffron, vanilla is the second most expensive spice traded globally. According to Zion Market Research, the global market of vanilla accounted for \$510 million in 2018 and is expected to grow to \$735 million by 2026.

In a half hectare plot within the family's 5-hectare farm in Barangay Kalaneg here, Awid has successfully cultivated at least 500 vanilla plants from 25 saplings when he started the venture in December 2020.

His vanilla plants, a type of vining orchid, crawled on madre de cacao trees that he also planted then. He propagated the plant through cuttings.

Awid graduated from the Davao Merchant Marine Academy of Southern Philippines. From an ordinary seafarer doing cleaning jobs, he rose from the ranks to become a merchant officer, serving as

safety officer and doing

administrative work.

After five years, he was already earning a six-digit salary when he quit the job to pursue vanilla farming in his quaint hometown, about three hours away from General Santos City, the economic center of Soccsksargen (South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos) region.

Experiment

While still doing seafaring work, Awid successfully propagated vanilla aboard a ship, giving him hope it can also do well on land.

He had proven himself right. After three years of vanilla farming, he is now producing pure vanilla extract for food flavoring enhancement and selling it to five-star hotels and high-end restaurants in major cities of the country



TENDER CARE Melvin Awid checks on his vanilla plants (above and balcony photos) at his demonstration farm in Maitum, Sarangani. The plant has not yet been grown on a commercial scale in the country but Awid, a former seafarer, is hoping that he and local farmers will be able to help produce bigger volumes of this spice to fill in the demand. —PHOTOS BY BONG S. SARMIENTO

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

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HIGH VALUE Vanilla extract produced by Melvin Awid from his farm sells for P3,500 per 350 milliliter bottle.

through UF Vanilla Farm.

Recently, Awid's venture gained the attention of the Department of Agriculture and the municipal and provincial governments, which vowed to support his project. Due to the growing interest in vanilla farming, Awid has established a demonstration facility just outside their house where he entertains visitors.

Compared to the cheap synthetic vanilla flavoring products readily available in the market, which can be bought for P110 per liter in online shops, Awid's pure vanilla extract sells for P3,500 for the 350-milliliter bottle, or P10 per ml.

Way out of poverty

There is a big market for nonsynthetic vanilla in the domestic and global markets, he said, noting that his vision is to make Sarangani the "Vanilla

Capital of the Philippines."

Sarangani Gov. Rogelio Pacquiao and the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist had promised support for Awid's project, committing to allot a budget to disperse vanilla cuttings to farmers.

Sarangani is among the top 10 poorest provinces in the country and vanilla cultivation could offer a way out by getting indigenous peoples and out-of-school youth to plant the crop, Awid said.

Vanilla thrives well in shaded areas and does not need plenty of water, he noted. Hence letting the plant crawl in madre de cacao trees, which is easy to propagate, is a good and cheap farming practice, he added.

Awid said that from planting, vanilla can flower in three years with one plant producing at least 2.5 kilo-

grams of pods, which when processed can yield 10 liters of vanilla extract for food flavoring, or 5 ml to 25 ml of pure essential oil.

A vanilla plant has a productive life of 10 to 15 years.

In a time when children of farmers have been leaning toward white collar jobs and tending to shy away from farming due to its low earnings, Awid's career shift from a lucrative job as a seafarer may be frowned upon.

"Farming is not a mediocre profession. In the case of vanilla, there's a big opportunity from it," he stressed, saying once his plants reach their full potential, he can earn even bigger than his stint on board sea vessels.

"While earning from farming, I also have the precious luxury of owning my time," Awid beamed.

Looking for suppliers

According to him, a potential client from the United States is looking for suppliers of pure vanilla extracts who can produce a volume of at least 100,000 tons per year.

Some 50 ha to 100 ha of vanilla farm can produce such volume, Awid said, urging farmers in Sarangani and neighboring provinces to shift to vanilla farming.

"With more farmers planting vanilla, we are looking to consolidate our production so we can meet the demand of big clients," he said.

Admittedly, vanilla farming is relatively new in the Philippines, with few farms in Luzon cultivating the crop so far.

By taking a leap of faith, Awid is hoping he can trigger the interest of other farmers or even small backyard owners, beginning in his province, to start farming vanilla. **INQ**



All that glitters is not good for this Laguna lake

By Gregg Yan
Contributor

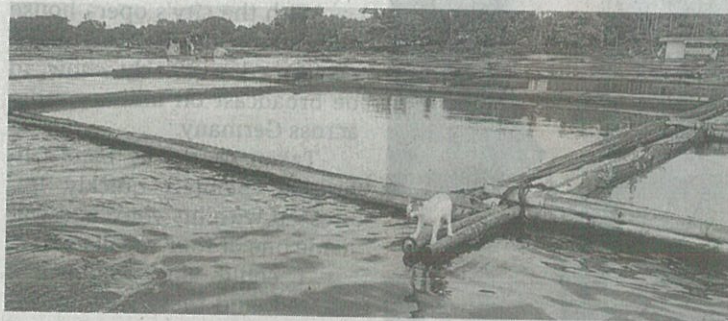
For almost a decade now, Lake Sampaloc in San Pablo, Laguna province, has been host to a growing golden horde.

But it's a glistening sight that comes at a great ecological cost.

Jepolo Austria used to raise only Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) and bighead carp (*Hypophthalmichthys nobilis*) in his fish pens, but now he also harvests and sells a more colorful catch.

"They are perfect for ponds because they look a bit like koi," said Austria, or Mang Puloy to his neighbors. "We call them 'flowerhorns' and they were introduced here sometime in 2015." He said he would sell them for P100 per kilo if they were to be eaten, or P5 apiece if to be kept as pets.

"But I hope these golden newcomers do not affect my tilapia farm too much," he told this writer.



Here's one of the orange delights from Lake Sampaloc



EYE-CATCHING ALIEN There's "gold" in Lake Sampaloc, but it's not necessarily a welcome find for fish pen owners. Bright orange fish known as "flowerhorns"—originally from Central America and usually kept in aquariums—pose a threat as an invasive species that could decimate the local tilapia population.

—PHOTOS BY GREGG YAN/CONTRIBUTOR

With more and more invasive fish prowling our freshwater ecosystems, we are gradually depriving ourselves of the diversity of our indigenous nutritional sources and gourmet options

Dr. Mundita Lim

Executive director of the Asean Center for Biodiversity



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'Midas' threat

Flowerhorns are hybrid cichlids that are popularly kept in aquariums because of their visual appeal and interesting behavior. Cichlids (pronounced "sick-lids") refer to a large family of freshwater fish whose members range from the colorful mbuna (pronounced "em-buna") found in Lake Malawi (in the landlocked country of Malawi in South Africa) to the tasty tilapia that are raised in the Philippines. Until verified

through further studies, the flowerhorns in Lake Sampaloc are believed to be Midas cichlids (*Amphilophus citrinellus*) which are native to tropical and Central America, particularly in Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Highly aggressive, they can grow about a foot in length and develop a prominent "nuchal hump," a ball-like organ on their forehead. Although a source of delight for tourists and additional income for the likes of Mang Puloy, they have

spread unchecked as an invasive species in lakes and waterways around the world, from the United States to Singapore.

Omnivorous

"Having Midas cichlids in our local lakes poses a threat to our economically important native or indigenous fish species, since cichlids are omnivorous and can feed on the larvae and juveniles of native fish species," said Dr. Maria Rowena Eguia, an associate professorial lecturer

at De La Salle University who has been studying aquaculture for the past 40 years.

"The Asean [region] is rich in freshwater biodiversity [thanks to] a number of inland lakes whose unique geological history allows them to support species and subspecies endemic to these water bodies. Introducing alien species into these closed systems will greatly impact the native species in those lakes," said Dr. Mundita Lim, executive director of the Asean Center for Biodiversity. (Asean stands for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.)

"Tilapia and the infamous knife fish, for instance, are predators which can devour endemic fish species to extinction. Other invasive alien fish such as janitorfish can compete with local species for food and space, thus eventually displacing them," Lim added.

The tilapia is one example of

an invasive species that eventually became economically useful and is now commonly farmed. But a more recent invader like the flowerhorn cichlid can feed on the larvae and juveniles of tilapia, potentially affecting the livelihood of local raisers, Eguia said.

Down to 3 natives

Lake Sampaloc is the largest of San Pablo's famed Seven Crater Lakes, which are all interconnected. Experts now fear that the golden Midas cichlids can eventually spread to the other six lakes.

In 2014, the Seven Crater Lakes system was classified by the Global Nature Fund as "threatened" because of pollution and the dwindling native fish population.

In a study conducted by Jonathan Briones and fellow researchers in February 2016, nine of a dozen fish species recorded in Lake Sampaloc were found to be invasive. There were only

ing—two types of "biya" or goby and the endangered "ayungin."

Providing a bigger picture, a paper published by AG Cagauan in November 2008 showed that over 170 foreign fish species had been introduced to the Philippines in the past century.

The Midas cichlids are just the latest in a long line of finned invaders like the clown knife fish (*Chitala ornata*), janitorfish (*Pterygoplichtys* and *Hypostomus spp.*) and the various tilapia species that now dominate most Philippine lakes and rivers.

In enclosed bodies of water like Laguna de Bay and Taal Lake, the native "maliputo" (*Caranx ignobilis*) and "tawilis" (*Sardinella tawilis*) are facing such threats.

"With more and more invasive fish prowling our freshwater ecosystems, we are gradually depriving ourselves of the diversity of our indigenous nutritional sources and gourmet options," Lim said.

To help stop the spread of invasive fish, a 2019 study by Jennifer Poniente and fellow researchers recommended various interventions to contain the problem. Among the potential solutions are tighter controls on the pet trade, especially in the propagation and sale of ornamental fish. **INQ**

The author is the executive director of Best Alternatives, a nonprofit established in 2014 that promotes sustainable and ethical alternatives to practices and technologies that can harm the environment.

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Phl, Australia collaborate on quality improvement of Carabao mangoes

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

The Philippines and Australia are collaborating to improve the export quality of Carabao mangoes.

Under the collaboration, the Philippines and Australia are identifying potential strategies to reduce fruit fly infestation and improve the yield and quality of Carabao mango through innovative area-wide management (AWM) approaches.

This is funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) under its project "Development of area-wide management approaches for fruit flies in mango for Indonesia, Philippines Australia, and the Asia-Pacific region."

The Department of Science and

Technology-Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD), as one of the project's key partners, serves as the Philippine counterpart of ACIAR in monitoring the project.

The project is implemented in three sites in Samal Island, Davao del Norte and Davao City.

"Significant outcomes of the project are set to increase the profits of mango growers, expand market access, and boost the mango industry, not only in the Philippines but the whole Asia-Pacific Region," DOST-PCAARD said.

So far, with the integration of AWM, pest and disease control strategies, and best management practices, the agency said farmer cooperators showcased their man-

go fruits with promising qualities for export.

This is largely contributed by using recommended fruit bagging material by the farmer co-operators, which provided visible differences in the fruit quality as compared to the use of imported newspapers.

The use of the said fruit bagging material may also potentially reduce pesticide application.

DOST-PCAARD said a project team from the University of the Philippines Mindanao, led by Emma Ruth Bayogan, is exploring the optimal number of uses for the fruit bagging material.

"This will determine the overall costs of its utilization in mango production. They are also working on improving postharvest handling systems, such as opti-

mizing hot water treatment to prolong the shelf-life of quality mango," it said.

Meanwhile, the Provincial Agriculturist Office (PAGRO) of Davao del Norte led by Juliet Cristina Zambrano is also intensifying its efforts to promote the utilization of the bagging material, alongside implementation of good agricultural practices (GAP) through their partnerships with local farmer cooperatives.

Entomologist Celia Medina of UP Los Baños (UPLB) is spearheading the implementation of the fruit fly monitoring study to continuously assess fruit fly injury levels on the mango fruits produced.

"This study will serve as an indicator of the project's success," the DOST-PCAARD said.



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SIBUYAS CARTEL

YARI SA NBI

Iskrap

Ni Nancy Carvajal

Natapos nang kalkalin ng National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) ang dahilan ng pagsipa ng presyo ng sibuyas na umabot hanggang P800 per kilo noong Disyembre 2022.

Ayon sa isang NBI insider, inihahanda na ngayon ang mga kasong isasampa laban sa mga pribadong indibidwal at mga nasa gobyerno na nagsabwatan umano para sumirit ang presyo ng sibuyas.

Naging malaking balita ang presyo ng sibuyas noong nakaraang taon matapos na sumirit ito at nilagpasan pa ang minimum wage ng mga manggagawa.

"The investigators have reached a conclusion and recommended to file criminal and administrative cases against several individuals responsible for the unprecedented highest price of onion-globally," wika ng source.

Sabi pa ng source, hindi lang

manipulasyon sa presyo ng sibuyas ang sinilip ng NBI kundi maging ang dahilan kung bakit nagkaroon ng shortage sa supply nito.

May mga testigo aniya ang NBI na tinukoy ang mga indibidwal na nakinabang sa pagsipa ng presyo ng sibuyas.

"There were witnesses interviewed by investigators and pointed to these individuals not only to the cause of the high price, but also benefitted from the high price," ayon pa sa source.

Tumanggi ang source na pangalanan ang mga indibidwal na inirekomendang sampahan ng mga kasong kriminal at administratibo dahil ayaw pangunahan ang Department of Justice (DOJ). Subalit tiniyak nito na kasama sa mga sasampahan ng demanda ay mga indibidwal mula sa pribadong sektor at mga opisyal ng gobyerno.

"There are private business

persons and government people who knowingly manipulated the high price or knew that the dwindling supply of onions could lead to price hike, but still did not act on it swiftly to prevent the high price of onions," sabi ng insider.

Napag-alaman pa na hindi lamang mga negosyante na nagsamantala sa shortage ng sibuyas ang inimestigahan ng NBI kundi maging ang mga ahensiya ng gobyerno na naging pabaya sa kanilang mandato.

"It's not enough that cases will be filed against smugglers and cartel illegal traders, but also those responsible for the scarcity of supply," ayon pa sa insider.

Nagsagawa rin ng imbestigasyon ang Kamara sa presyo ng sibuyas subalit wala pang isinasampung pormal na kaso sa hukuman laban sa mga pinaniniwalaang sangkot sa manipulasyon ng produktong ito.

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Indonesian market stops dog, cat meat sale

TOMOHON, Indonesia: Authorities have announced the end of the "brutally cruel" slaughter of dogs and cats for their meat at a notorious animal market on the central Indonesian island of Sulawesi following a years-long campaign by local activists and world celebrities.

The Tomohon Extreme Market will become the first such market in the Southeast Asian archipelago to go dog and cat meat-free, said anti-animal cruelty group Humane Society International (HSI). Images of dogs and cats being bludgeoned and blowtorched while still alive had sparked outrage.

Edwin Roring, regional secretary of the city of Tomohon in North Sulawesi province, announced the permanent end of the slaughter and trade on Friday. HSI said they would

rescue all the remaining live dogs and cats from the slaughterhouse suppliers and take them to sanctuaries.

"We hope that Tomohon will be totally free from dog and cat meat trades," Roring said in his remarks. "We believe the way to reduce people's interest in consuming dog and cat meat in Tomohon is to stop selling it in markets."

He urged people to consume animal food sources that are more hygienic and do not cause rabies, such as pork, beef and chicken. He vowed to deploy law enforcement officers in the markets to ensure there were no more dog and cat meat sellers in the city.

The Tomohon Extreme Market had previously been touted as a tourist attraction and listed on TripAdvisor as a destination that also sells cat meat and the carcasses of wild and protected species such as bats,

snakes and other reptiles.

HSI and Indonesian groups operating under the banner of Dog Meat Free Indonesia are campaigning to end the trade in live dogs for human consumption, as rabies could spread to humans during the slaughter or contact with infected meat.

Videos shot by the campaigners at two markets in North Sulawesi province in 2018 showed dogs cowering in cages as workers pulled the howling animals out and bludgeoned their heads with wooden batons. Often still moving, the animals are then blasted with blowtorches to remove their hair in preparation for butchering and sale.

The welfare groups called the treatment of the animals at the markets "brutally cruel" and like "walking through hell," generating sympathy among Indonesians and around the world.

International actors and celebrities in 2018 appealed to President Joko Widodo to close the markets, saying if Indonesia joined other Asian nations that have already banned the trade, it would be "celebrated globally" and end a stain on the country's reputation.

Actor Cameron Diaz, talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, talent spotter Simon Cowell, comedian Ricky Gervais, Indonesian pop singer Anggun and musician Moby are among the more than 90 celebrities listed in the letter.

'Absolutely shocking'

"These animals, many of them stolen pets, are subjected to crude and brutal methods of capture, transport and slaughter, and the immense suffering and fear they must endure is heartbreaking and absolutely shocking," the letter said, prompting In-

donesia's central government to issue a regulation saying dog meat is not food and thus local administrations should act to ban the trade.

North Sulawesi province is home to more than 2.6 million people, who are mainly Christian in the mostly Muslim archipelago nation. Eating dog and cat meat with special spices is a hereditary tradition for most people in the province, which has been very difficult to get rid of, said Frank Delano, a local animal welfare activist.

Thousands of dogs and cats are slaughtered weekly in North Sulawesi, according to anti-animal cruelty groups.

Karanganyar district in Central Java became the first to issue a formal ban in 2019, followed by other regions in 2020 and 2021. Most recently, authorities in Indonesia's capital Jakarta announced in March they have banned the dog and cat meat trades. But the dog and cat markets were on Sulawesi.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, might not seem a likely hub of dog meat cuisine as nearly 90 percent of the country's 270 million people are followers of Islam, which considers and view dog products as haram, or forbidden, in the same way as pork. Most Muslims won't touch a dog, much less eat one.

But the archipelagic nation is also home to many other faiths, some of whom consider dog meat a traditional delicacy or believe it has health properties.

As much as 7 percent of Indonesians eat dog, according to Dog Meat Free Indonesia, mostly in North Sulawesi, North Sumatra and East Nusa Tenggara provinces that have a majority of the population identifying as Christian.

AP



SAVED FROM SLAUGHTER Members of the anti-animal cruelty group Humane Society International transport a cage containing dogs from a slaughterhouse in the city of Tomohon, North Sulawesi province, central Indonesia on Friday, July 21, 2023. AP PHOTO