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## Are technocrats misleading us?

To the credit of the President, he knows the challenges he must meet and he said so clearly in the first paragraph of his SONA last Monday. This is such a relief from his predecessor who merely rumbled and cursed his way through the annual exercise before the two houses of Congress.

“One year ago today, I stood here before you, setting forth the plans that we have to improve our economy, bring jobs to our people, improve the ease of doing business, recalibrate our educational system to adapt to the new economy, lower and rationalize energy costs, boost agricultural production, enhance healthcare, and continue social programs for the poor and the vulnerable.”

### DEMAND AND SUPPLY



**BOO CHANCO**

Now we know he knows how his performance will be measured by progress on all those fronts.

No reasonable person should expect him to deliver on everything after just a year in office. But after over a year, we are entitled to hear how he plans to proceed to make things better on all those fronts. He tried to do that last Monday.

The President focused early in his SONA on the economy. There was no need for the President to mislead in his recitation of these numbers. We know and feel each day how good or how bad our economy is doing. And macroeconomic data like GDP, whose growth is hardly inclusive, means nothing to most Filipinos who care more about how much their peso can buy in terms of their daily needs.

“While the global prospects were bleak, our economy posted a 7.6 percent growth in 2022 – our highest growth rate in 46 years... We are still considered to be among the fastest-growing economies in the Asian region and in the world. It is a testament to our strong macroeconomic fundamentals...”

The numbers are technically correct, but misleading because they are presented out of context. As explained in my column last Monday, our seemingly high GDP growth rate comes from a very low base, so it isn’t as impressive as we are being hoodwinked to think. And we are the fastest growing in ASEAN now because we declined the most in 2020.

Remember that the economy contracted by 9.6 percent (a -9.6 percent “growth” rate) in 2020. While the economy picked up in 2021 and 2022, as Rappler pointed out, “it was still not enough to bring the economy back to its pre-pandemic trajectory. To return to this level by 2028, annual growth would have to reach 9.4 percent per year.” In other words, we are just inching back to where we were, but still nothing to proudly beat our breasts about yet.

Then the President talked about inflation.

“Inflation rate is moving in the right direction. From 8.7 percent in January, our inflation has continued to ease up in all regions, settling now at 5.4 percent for June. What this means is that in spite of all the difficulties, we are transforming the economy. We are stabilizing the prices of all critical commodities.”

Again, as I explained last Monday, the cooling of inflation was more because prices of oil and imported food commodities have gone down. The President has miserably failed to bring down food price inflation, a big contributor to our high inflation rate. He allowed the protectionists in sugar and the domestic food cartels in cahoots with some DA bureaucrats in onions and other foodstuffs to keep retail prices high.

Then he makes an outrageous claim: “In the past few months, we’ve seen prices of goods go down across various sectors. We’ve proven that we can lower the price of rice, meat, fish, vegetables, and sugar.”

Excuse me? Who among his economic advisers are feeding him these falsehoods? Sugar is still over P100/kg at most markets other than Kadiwa. As for the other essential food items, there has been little or no movement.

Here is how *Rappler* explained why this claim of decreasing food prices is misleading.

“Consumer price index data, which is computed based on average prices relative to 2018, showed that the prices of rice, meat, fish, vegetables, and sugar in the past few months have

either increased or stayed the same.

“In his first year as president and concurrent agriculture chief, Marcos also saw skyrocketing prices of kitchen staples onion (up 560 percent at peak from June 2022), sugar (40 percent jump from June to August 2022), and eggs (40 percent rise since June 2022) – all of which have yet to fully recover.”

Economists point out that declining inflation rate only means prices are still increasing, but at a slower rate. Prices today are still significantly higher than they were last year. The President must have the guts to fix things through structural reforms.

There is no arguing with the President that there are many things in our economy over which we have no control, like global food and energy prices. But the President isn’t entirely being truthful in saying that “over those where we do have control, we are doing everything we can.”

For instance, the President recognized that the escalation of retail food prices can also be blamed on hoarders and other market manipulators. So, there should be very visible law enforcement actions against these hoarders who, for instance, corner available cold storage in onion growing areas to force farmers to sell their produce to them cheaply and then they turn around and sell to consumers at atrocious prices. We need an all-out war against these economic saboteurs.

The DOJ had determined the people in this onion cartel some years ago, but not one has been charged. The House also recently determined culpable parties in the onion price gouging, which should be useful information for prosecutors to do their work. Maybe the Philippine Competition Commission, in their cushy ivory tower, should also be awakened to do what they are supposed to do in real life.

Context is everything. Statistics and economic data can lie if presented with that intention. We deserve better from the technocrats who should not be afraid to lose their jobs in the process of telling their boss what is true. The technocrats should not compromise their integrity by being propagandists at the expense of truth.





## Marcos' Malaysia trip yields \$285 million in investment pledges

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.'s three-day visit to Malaysia has yielded \$285 million in investment pledges, the presidential palace said on Thursday.

The pledges cover various sectors, including the food processing industry, multi-service digital platforms, aviation, logistics, manufacturing, infrastructure and water, it said.

In a meeting with Malaysia-based businessmen, Mr. Marcos Jr. touted the country's macroeconomic fundamentals, including 6.4% economic growth in the first quarter, which is within the government's 6 to 7% goal for the year.

"The reason that we put such emphasis on the growth figures is that as all the countries have gone into debt, a higher rate of debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP), because of the pandemic and the costs of the pandemic response for all the countries," he said. "It is our fundamental theory that we should grow out of that debt."

Under the medium-term fiscal framework, the government aims to cut the debt-to-GDP ratio to less than 60% by 2025, and further to 51.5% by 2028.

Separately, the Trade department said five companies had signed letters of intent during the Philippine delegation's one-on-one meetings with Malaysian businessmen.

One of the companies is dairy company Farm Fresh Berhad, which is seeking to expand in the Philippines through a \$20-million cattle breeding project.

The company is expected to start operations for the project by 2028, with an estimated employment of 200 local workers, the Trade department said.

"Further, the company has an ongoing construction of a 6,000-square meter dairy processing facility in Pampanga and a lease of 200 to 400 hectares of contiguous farmland intended to raise 2,000 milking cows," it added. — KATA





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## Value of smuggled goods seized by BOC hits P30.1B

THE value of smuggled goods the Bureau of Customs said it has seized has hit P30.1 billion as of July 25, the BOC announced last Thursday.

Customs officials said the goods, seized through 654 operations, include various agricultural products amounting to over P2.9 billion.

During the same reference period, the BOC said it has issued seven show-cause orders against erring personnel of the bureau. It added that 66 personnel were placed under investigation by its Intelligence and Investigation Service (CIIS).

The bureau added its Account Management Office (AMO) has processed the accreditation of 7,733 Importers and 1,263 Customs brokers from January 1 to July 25. It said that the AMO has revoked the accreditation of 95 Importers and 36 Customs brokers "due to violations of customs laws, rules and regulations."

The BOC disclosed the information three days after President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. said during his second State of the Nation Address that the government would be more aggressive in curbing the country's smuggling problems, particularly in agricultural items.

"We reaffirm our commitment to addressing the pressing issues of smuggling and hoarding of agricultural products in our country," the bureau said. "We stand fully supportive of the President's directives

and will collaborate closely in the investigation he has ordered."

The BOC vowed that it would implement a series of "proactive" measures to "bolster" its efforts in curbing smuggling. One of these initiatives would involve "enhancing the bureau's pre-arrival and post-arrival technical targeting and fraud detecting mechanism of imported goods."

"Investing in additional equipment and providing capacity building for our personnel that will further strengthen our intelligence and enforcement capabilities," the BOC said.

The bureau also committed to "intensify" its collaboration, joint operations and information with local and international law enforcement and regulatory agencies.

The BOC said it is committed to expedite the prosecution of filed cases before the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Professional Regulation Commission.

"Additionally, through the DOJ, we will strive to increase the conviction rate of smugglers, serving as a deterrent to others involved in such illicit activities," it added.

Earlier this week, Marcos warned that the "days of smugglers and hoarders are numbered." (Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/07/25/state-of-phl-sound-improving-marcos/>) Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas



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## A forward-looking SONA



Sonny M. Angara

### BETTER DAYS

**L**ISTENING to the one hour and a half second State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., we looked back at what the administration has done in its first full year in office and its plans for the coming year. Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, the start of the Marcos presidency was challenging, to say the least. At the end of 2021, the country's unemployment rate stood at 7.8 percent. By the end of 2022, this went down to 5.4 percent. The tourism sector, which was among the sectors that suffered the most during the pandemic, has also rebounded from its slump. For the first half of 2023, the President reported that we have received three million international visitors. This represents 62 percent of the 4.8 million target for the entire year.

Inflation continued to ease from 8.7 percent in January 2023 to 5.4 percent in June. In 2022, our economy grew by 7.6 percent. In the first quarter, the growth rate was pegged at 6.4 percent. The President noted that we are still within our full-year target of 6 to 7 percent and that we are still considered to be among the

fastest growing economies in Asia and the world.

The right policies, programs and investments must be made, not only to maintain this growth trajectory, but also to build the foundation for sustainable growth in the long term. We were pleased to hear from the President about giving priority

to investments in both public infrastructure and in developing the capacity of the people.

For agriculture, the President talked about boosting agricultural production through consolidation, modernization, mechanization and improvement of value chains. The selection of new infrastructure projects is very timely and forward looking. Included in the list are projects related to digital connectivity, energy, airports, seaports and mass transport.

We thank the President for not losing sight of our health sector and for ensuring the distribution of the allowances due to our healthcare workers, who sacrificed a lot during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our push for innovation as a key component of success for businesses, particularly the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) was also given a huge boost with the President's pronouncement about the need to foster innovation alongside the culture of entrepreneurship. And to ensure that the workforce will be equipped with the skills necessary to fill up the requirements of employers, the President recognized the

need for their continuous reskilling and upskilling.

The digitalization of government will also contribute to the efforts to make it easier to do business in the country while providing our people with better services. The President also promised to improve the country's Internet infrastructure to improve Internet speed and to provide all parts of the country, including the remote areas with Internet connectivity.

All of these I mentioned in the second SONA of the President are part and parcel of our Tatak Pinoy advocacy, which aims to grow and empower Filipino industries so that they can produce complex, high-quality, high-value products and make them more globally competitive. We thank the President for including our Tatak Pinoy bill among his list of priority legislation for Congress. The recognition by the President of the importance of this measure bodes well for the future of our industries and service providers in their efforts to expand, gain recognition and penetrate the world market.

Tatak Pinoy is about enhancing  
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## Angara...

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the capabilities of the Filipino workforce through reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning in order to make them more competitive and responsive to the requirements of employers, including potential investors in search of qualified personnel. It is about encouraging innovation so that Filipino industries will be able to produce unique, high-quality, globally competitive products that are up to par with international standards. It is about diversifying our exports and making our economy more robust and prosperous.

The Tatak Pinoy bill hews closely to the Philippine Economic Development Plan 2023 to 2028 and the new Philippine Export Development Plan, which are the building blocks to achieve strong economic growth. In pushing for Tatak Pinoy, we always emphasize the need for close collabo-

ration between the government and the private sector in order to achieve our goal of bringing the Philippines closer to the ranks of the industrialized nations.

We have already conducted four hearings on the Tatak Pinoy bill in the Committee on Finance and we will hold two or three more before wrapping up and preparing our committee report for sponsorship before we start our deliberations on the 2024 national budget. With the backing of the President, we expect to see even greater support from our colleagues in the Senate and the House of Representatives for this important measure.

*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, co-authored, and sponsored more than 330 laws. He is currently serving his second term in the Senate.*

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## Farmers' group says Kadiwa 'ineffective'

FARMERS organization Bantay Bigas said on Thursday that the government-run Kadiwa Centers were ineffective in bringing down the price of rice to P25 per kilo as promised by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

"There are thousands of Kadiwa centers... they are there but those are limited and are not significant in lowering the prices in the market. The rice being sold at P25 at those centers are limited," Bantay Bigas spokesman and Amihan secretary general Cathy Estavillo told *The Manila Times* in Filipino.

In a statement posted on the Bantay Bigas Facebook page, Estavillo called on Marcos to lower the price of rice, which is currently at P42 to P43 per kilo.

"Our farmers continue to suffer, because of the laws that result in an influx of imported goods in our country, and the reason why the prices of goods are increasing is because the government wants to continue importing. Products remain expensive, that's why the President has nothing to say on the P20 per kilo [for rice], and he is focused on the building of Kadiwa centers," she added.

Estavillo lamented that Mar-

cos did not mention the almost weekly oil price hikes in his SONA on Monday.

She added Marcos failed to consider the effects of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership on the market, noting the government has removed its regulatory power to implement price control, a situation she said encourages importers to become cartels.

Estavillo said they are not happy with how the President is handling the agriculture sector.

"We are not happy in what the President is doing in the agriculture sector because the problems with farmers still persist. Their products have low sales because of the loss of the post-harvest facilities, a lack of irrigation, and the continuous displacement of farmers due to land use conversion, as well as the importation of rice," she said, noting the government is not providing subsidies for farmers.

"In the first year of the President's governance, it's like a calamity for our farmers, because even if he is the Agriculture secretary, we see agriculture prices going up," Estavillo said, citing the price increase of onions and sugar.

ARIC JOHN SY CUA



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REMATE OPINION

## ANG INYONG LINGKOD

NI DR. HILDA C. ONG

SANG-AYON ang inyong Agarang Serbisyo Lady nang sinabi ni President Ferdinand "BBM" Marcos, Jr. na dumating na ang "Bagong Pilipinas" na siyang branding ng kanyang pamumuno at administrasyon.

Sa kanyang ikalawang SONA o State of the Nation Address ay iniulat sa bayan ni Pangulong BBM ang ating kasalukuyang estado, na tayo ay may magandang hinaharap.

Lisa ang forecast o prediksyon ng mga global financial institutions katulad ng International Monetary Fund at Asian Development Bank, magpapatuloy ang pagganda ng ating ekonomiya hanggang sa pagtatapos ng termino ni Pangulong BBM sa taong 2028. Sa katotohanan lang, tayo ang siyang may pinakamabilis na paglago ng ekonomiya sa buong ASEAN region at sa Asian region.

Ang inflation naman ay unti-unti nang kontrolado ng pamahalaan lalo pa't isinasabay nito ang agrikultura at nakatakdang kumilos ang buong puwersa ng pamahalaan para hulihin ang mga nagsasamantala at lumilikha ng pekeng krisis sa mga pangunahing produkto sa merkado, at mga smuggler.

Maagang naghanda ang Marcos administration sa inaasahang pagtama ng El Niño weather phenomenon na magtatagal hanggang sa unang bahagi ng taong 2024. Nasa 66 na mga lalawigan sa kabuuang 82 ang makararanas ng tagtuyot.

Nakalatag ang mga plano para maseguro ang food security, health security, peace and order, energy security, at mas pinatutukan ng Pangulong BBM ang water security partikular sa Metro Manila. Naglaan ng halagang P14.5 billion pesos para sa water supply projects at rain water collection system na matagal nang nais

## MAY MAGANDANG HINAHARAP ANG "BAGONG PILIPINAS"

ipatupad ni Executive Director Dr Seville D. David Jr. ng NWRB o National Water Resources Board.

Malinaw ang polisiya ng pamahalaan pagdating sa ugnayang panlabas na tayo ay kaibigan ng lahat ng mga bansa, sa mga kinakailangang gawin sa sektor ng edukasyon, sa pagpapababa ng bilang ng mga nakararanas ng gutom at malnutrisyon, sa mga foreign investor, sa kalusugan na para sa lahat, modernisasyon ng pampublikong transportasyon, sa buhay na buhay na turismo, kapakanan ng mga bulnerableng sektor, sa ating mga overseas Filipino worker at overseas Filipinos.

Pagdating sa Maharlika Investment Fund, maganda ang layunin ng pagkakaroon ng sariling pool of resources para pondohan ang mga mas malalaki pang proyekto sa hinaharap. Hindi pa natin makikita sa ngayon kung epektibo o hindi ang MIF, pero ang mga ibinabato ditong mga negatibong resulta ay pawang mga espekulasyon din naman. Kaya makabubuti na bigyan natin ito ng pagkakataon. Baka nga pagdating ng araw, tayo na ang nagbibigay ng tulong at namumuhunan sa mga developing nations dahil tayo ay ganap nang first world country.

Hindi masama ang mangarap. Mula naman sa kanyang panunumpa ay klarado ang mga pangarap ni Pangulong BBM para sa bayan.

Sa tulong ng Maykapal, sa ating pagtitiwala sa liderato ni Pangulong BBM, at sa ating pagiging responsableng mamamayan, sama-sama at sabay-sabay nating masasaksihan ang pagdating ng isang "Bagong Pilipinas".

Kung nais ninyong malaman ang TAMANG IMPORMASYON, TAMANG SERBISYO ni AGARANG SERBISYO LADY, i-search sa YOUTUBE CHANNEL, "HILDA ONG" at sa Facebook Fanpage "TV RADIO HILDA ONG", Huwag kalimutan i-click ang salitang "SUBSCRIBE", "LIKE" at "SHARE".



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## 'BILANG NA ANG ARAW NG MGA SMUGGLER' - PBBM

**S**A isang pambihirang pagkakataon ay nagsalita na ang Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., hinggil sa di mahinto-hintong problema ng smuggling na nagpapahirap sa bansa sa matagal nang panahon.

Bilang na ang araw ng mga smuggler, ito ang matigas na pahayag o babala ng Pangulo na binigkas sa kanyang ikalawang State of the Nation Address na ginanap sa Batasang Pambansa noong Hulyo 25.

Inatasan ang Department of Justice at National Bureau of Investigation na dakpin ang mga smuggler, isama na ang mga opisyal ng pamahalaan na nagsisilbing coddler at protectors ng mga smuggling syndicate.

### SMUGGLING SA BATANGAS

Speaking of smuggling, bukod sa Port of Manila at Manila International Container Port, ang Batangas Port ang paborito ng mga smuggler na daungan ng kanilang ipinupuslit na petroleum at agricultural products.

Milyong litro ng diesel, gasolina at liqui-

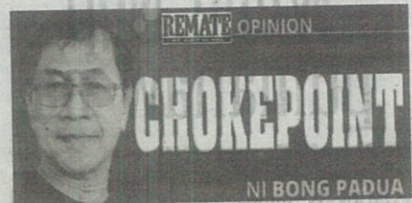
fied petroleum gas ay dumarating sa pier na ito tatlong beses kada linggo lulan ang mga barko ng sindikato na escorted pa ng Coast Guard at Navy patrol ships.

Hindi problema ang unloading ng nasabing smuggled petroleum products dahil pagdaong ng mga barkong may lulan hito ay kaagad sinasalubong ng mga ready buyer dala ang kanilang small cargo ship at tanker trucks.

Bukod sa malalaking factory owners, ang sindikato ng paihi na nag-operate sa Calabarzon o Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal at Quezon ang karamihang buyer ng smuggled oil products sa Batangas pier.

### SI ALING TESSIE NG CALABARZON

Ang smuggling sa Calabarzon ay di tumitigil dahil sa milyones na hatag sa ilang ti-



waling opisyaes ng Pambansang Pulisya at ganon din ang illegal business ni Aling Tessie na peryahan dahil protektado ng ilang tiwaling pulis sa Region 4A.

Ang perya ay ligal pero naging iligal ang negosyo ni Aling Tessie na nagkalat sa buong Calabarzon dahil bukod sa entertainment games ay nilagyan ito ng "color games" at beto-beto, hi-lo, didal at ibang larong sugal.

Dekada na raw ang operasyon ng perya business na ito ni Aling Tessie na walang idinulot na maganda sa buhay ng mga taga-R4A pero nagpayaman sa maraming corrupt police officials na umaalalay sa kanyang iligal na operasyon.



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## ABANGAN!

**H**INDI pa rin ako maka-move on sa mga narinig ko sa State of the Nation Address ni Pangulong Bongbong Marcos. At noong suyurin ko ang maraming reaksiyon ng netizens sa social media, mukha namang halos pareho rin sa naramdaman ko.

Ikalawang SONA ni PBBM, pero hindi na yata nakaalis sa antas ng mga pangarap noong Inaugural Speech at unang SONA n'ya noong 2022. Mabulaklak ang mga salita at mukhang napino ng maayos ang retoriko, pero kulang sa konkretong halimbawa at linaw ng pananaw.

Marami ang pagbabalik-tanaw sa mga programa ng tatay niya— kabilang na ang programa ng Kadiwa at ang panunumbalik daw ng sigla ng agrikultura at pagtatapos ng repormang agraryo.

Ang pinaka-inkredibol na narinig ko ay report n'ya tungkol sa ekonomiya. Nakikita na raw natin ang pagbaba ng presyo ng mga bilihin. Ang pagtaas ng ating Gross Domestic Pro-

duct na sukatan ng kaunlaran ng bansa. Ang pagtaas ng employment rate at ang inaasahang pagbaba ng inflation rate bago matapos ang taon.

Sabi nga ng mga netizen— mukhang hindi nakadaan sa palengke ang Pangulo nitong mga nakaraang buwan. At parang hindi naman yata lapat sa realidad ang mga istatistikang binabanggit n'ya sa mga paninda.

Medyo naka-nenerbyos din ang plano ng gobyerno na dagdagan ang ilang mga buwis tulad ng Road Users Tax at dagdag buwis sa mga matatamis na produkto o sugary products. Sa katapusan, ang mga ordinaryong tao ang tatamaan sa pagtaas ng presyo ng produkto tulad ng softdrinks, fruit juices at sa



REMATE OPINION

**ALINANG NAIBA**

NI ALIN FERRER

pagpaparehistro ng mga sasakyan.

Umiwas naman sa mga kontrobersyal na usapin ang SONA. Hindi nabanggit ang EDCA o Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement na pagdestino ng mga Akerikanong sundalo at kagamitan sa ilang military bases sa bansa.

Tahimik din tungkol sa isyu ng karpatang-pantao at ang kaso ni dating Pangulong Duterte sa International Criminal Court.

Hindi pa ako kumbinsido na ang lagay ng bansa ay matatag at matibay. Pero sige, pagkakaisa pa rin ang sigaw ng maraming Pilipino. Kaya abangan natin ang mga susunod na kabanata.





## Importante na may laman ang tiyan ng bawat Pilipino



**S**a kabila ng iba't ibang papel natin sa lipunan, tayong mga Pilipino ay may iisang hangarin: ang makamit ang isang maunlad at masaganang bansa kung saan ang bawat isa ay may sapat na pagkain sa hapag-kainan.

Sa kanyang ikalawang State of the Nation Address, ibinida ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ang mga hakbang na ginagawa ng kanyang administrasyon upang itaguyod ang food security sa bansa at tiyakin na walang Pilipino ang magugutom. Binigyang-diin niya ang kahalagahan ng sustainable farming at sa paggamit ng scientific methods sa ating agrikultura, na sa tingin ko ay isang napakahalagang aspekto sa pagpapalakas ng ating agricultural sector.

Bilang kasapi ng Senado, lubos tayong sumusuporta sa mga hakbang na ito na magbibigay ng direksyon sa ating sektor ng agrikultura patungo sa modernisasyon at pagpapaigting ng kakayahan nito na sumuporta sa mga pangangailangan ng bawat Pilipino. Napakaimportante na masolusyunan ang mga problemang kinakaharap ng ating mga magsasaka at mangingisda na nagbibigay ng pagkain sa ating mga hapag-kainan.

Ang aking tanging mga paalala lang: huwag dapat mapabayaang ang maliit na magsasaka at mangingisda, unahin natin ang mga mahihirap, at tiyaking may laman ang tiyan ng bawat Pilipino.

Tulad rin nang sinabi ko noon, dapat talagang labanan ang smugglers at hoarders na isa sa mga sanhi ng mataas na presyo ng mga bilihin at nagpapahirap sa ating consumers at producers. Kaya sang-ayon ako sa matapang na salita ng Pangulo na bilang na ang mga araw ng mga nagsasamantala.

Kailangan talaga ng political will para tugunan ang mga suliraning ito sa ating

sektor ng agrikultura, na isa ring malaking problema sa ating ekonomiya. Dahil dito, kaisa ako sa panawagan para sa isang komprehensibong imbestigasyon sa sinasabing onion cartel at sa smuggling at hoarding ng mga agricultural products.

Isa pa sa mga natatanging inisyatiba ng ating Pangulo ay ang Republic Act No. 11953 o ang New Agrarian Emancipation Act. Bilang isa sa mga author at co-sponsor ng batas na ito, nauunawaan ko ang kahalagahan ng mga ganitong hakbang upang matiyak ang kapakanan ng ating mga magsasaka, na silang tutulong sa atin upang maabot ang ating layunin na food security.

Bukod dito, isa rin ako sa mga mayakda ng RA 11901, na naglalayong palawakin ang agriculture, fisheries, at rural development financing system sa bansa. Bilang miyembro ng Senate Committee on Agriculture, patuloy kong itinataguyod ang pagpapaganda ng ating farmland irrigation, expansion ng National Rice Program, at ang conversion ng idle government lands para magamit sa agrikultura at makatulong sa pagpapabuti ng food production sa bansa.

Dagdag pa rito ay inihain ko rin ang Senate Bill No. 2117 na naglalayong magbigay ng full crop insurance coverage para sa ating agrarian reform beneficiaries kung maisabatas. Nariyan din ang SBN 2118, na layunin namang magbigay ng mas mahusay na insurance coverage at services sa mga magsasaka upang maibsan nila ang epekto ng mga kalamidad.

Nais kong idiin na ang ating adhikain ay hindi lamang para sa mga magsasaka, kundi pati na rin para sa lahat ng Pilipino na umaasa sa ating sektor ng agrikultura para sa kanilang pang-araw araw na pangangailangan. Sa mga hakbang na ito, inaasahan nating mababawasan, kung hindi man matutuldukan, ang kagutuman sa ating bansa.

Nagbukas man ang bagong session sa Senado, hindi pa rin matitunag ang ating hangarin na bumaba sa ating mga kababayan dahil bisyo ko na ang magserbisyo lalo na sa mga nangangailangan. Patuloy tayong personal na nakikinig sa kanilang mga suliranin, namamahagi ng tulong, nagtataguyod ng mga proyektong makakapagpaunlad ng kanilang

lugar, umaalalay sa mga may sakit, at nag-iwan ng ngiti sa oras ng kanilang pagdadalamhati.

Noong July 26, personal tayong tumulong sa 622 na biktima ng sunog sa Barangay San Dionisio, Parañaque City katuwang ang lokal na pamahalaan na pinamumunuan ni Mayor Eric Olivarez at Congressman Edwin Olivarez.

Maliban dito, nag-ikot din ang aking opisina sa buong bansa para mamahagi ng tulong sa mga nangangailangang komunidad. Kabilang rito ang mga naging biktima ng sunog noon na sinisikap na makabangon ngayon tulad ng 31 residente ng Asuncion, pito sa New Corella, lima sa Panabo City, at 12 sa Tagum City sa Davao Del Norte, pati dalawang biktima sa Laak at isa sa Maco sa Davao de Oro; at 146 sa Mati City, Davao Oriental. Bukod sa dagdag na tulong ng aking tanggapan ay katuwang din natin ang National Housing Authority na nagbigay ng pambili ng housing materials mula sa kanilang Emergency Housing Assistance Program na ating isinulong noon.

Ilang biktima ng nakaraang mga kalamidad ang atin ding tinulungan tulad ng 25 kababayan natin sa Mabini, at 25 din sa Pantukan sa Davao de Oro; at 58 naman sa Muntinlupa City.

Inalalayan din natin ang 350 pasyente sa isang medical and dental mission sa Bugasong, Antique. Tumulong din tayo sa 66 sa Pulilan, Bulacan; 199 benepisyaryo sa Cabaio, at 123 sa Gen. Mamerto Natividad sa Nueva Ecija; 100 sa Rosario at 100 din sa Batangas City, Batangas; at 66 sa San Miguel, Bulacan.

Tunay na napakahalaga ng mga hakbang na inilatag ni Pangulong Marcos Jr. sa kanyang SONA lalo na ang tungkol sa ating agriculture sector dahil napakahalaga ang laman ng sikmura ng ating mga kababayan, lalo na ang mga mahihirap.

Bilang inyong representante sa Senado, susuportahan ko ang mga programa ng administrasyon ni Pangulong Marcos Jr. lalo na ang higit na makakabenepisyo sa mga mahihirap. Iisa naman ang ating layunin at iyon ay ang matiyak na walang Pilipinong magugutom, na may access ang lahat sa masustansyang pagkain, at masiguro na matatamasa ng bawat Pilipino ang isang mas maunlad at masaganang bukas.





## Ang mas malaking hamon



### USAPANG BARRYKADA

BARRY GUTIERREZ

**S**a nakaraang State of the Nation Address (SONA) ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., may ilang magandang mga mungkahi at layunin na napapaloob sa kanyang plataporma na ang ilan ay dating isinalaysay din ni Vice President Leni Robredo sa kanyang plataporma noong 2022. Ipinakita ng Pangulo sa SONA na handa siyang ipatupad ang mahuhusay na mungkahi, saan man ito galing, basta ito ay tutugon sa mga pangangailangan at pangarap ng mga Pilipino.

Isa sa mga ito ay ang layunin na matiyak na ang pagtatrabaho ng mga Pilipino sa ibang bansa ay hindi lamang dahil sa pangangailangan, kundi dahil sa kanilang kagustuhan. Kailangan nating

tiyakin na may sapat na oportunidad sa loob ng ating bansa upang magkaroon ng magandang kinabukasan ang ating mga kababayan.

Karugtong nito, ang pagpapalakas sa sektor ng Blue (maritime) at Green (agrikultura at climate-smart na negosyo) economies ay isa sa mga hakbang upang mapanatili ang ating mga manggagawa sa Pilipinas at mabigyan sila ng maayos na trabaho at kinabukasan.

Inilahad din ni Pangulong Marcos, Jr. sa kanyang SONA ang pangangailangan ng community-based drug rehabilitation upang labanan ang problema ng droga sa bansa. Ang pagtutok sa rehabilitasyon at pagbabalik-loob sa mga nagkasala ay isang mahalagang aspekto ng isang tunay na pagbabago sa lipunan. Ito ay nagpapakita ng pag-unawa at malasakit sa mga nangangailangan ng tulong at pangalawang pagkakataon.

Napagtuunan din ni Pangulong Marcos, Jr. ang mahalagang papel ng renewable energy sa pag-unlad ng ating bansa. Ang pagpapaunlad at paggamit ng malinis at renewable na enerhiya ay naglalayong mapangalagaan ang kalikasan

at mapababa ang mga gastos sa kuryente. Ito ay isang malaking hakbang tungo sa pagiging mas sustainable at ekonomikal sa larangan ng enerhiya.

Lahat ng mga mungkahing ito ay mabuti at mabisang paraan upang unti-unting mapaangat ang ating bansa. Ngunit ang tunay na pagsubok ay kung paano ito maisasakatuparan ng gobyerno. Ang pagpapatupad ng mga hakbang na ito ay nangangailangan ng mabisang koordinasyon at pagtutulungan ng lahat ng sektor ng lipunan.

Ang pag-asa at inspirasyon na dala ng SONA ay nagpapakita ng potensyal at posibilidad ng tunay na pagbabago. Ngunit hindi ito magiging posible kung walang tamang hakbang na pagpapatupad. Maayos na pamumuno, masigasig na pagkilos, malinis na pamamalakad – lahat ito ay kinakailangan para ang pag-asa ay hindi maging paasa lamang. Kasama na rin dito ang pagiging bukas at handang makinig sa mga mungkahi at kritisismo ng publiko na mahalaga upang mas mapabuti pa ang mga mungkahi at plano ng gobyerno.

Sa dulo, ito ang mas malaking hamon sa ating kasalukuyang pamahalaan.





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# Egay agri damage reaches P53.1 M

By **BELLA CARIASO**

**Damage to agriculture due to Super Typhoon Egay has reached P53.1 million, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).**

At a press conference yesterday, DA Assistant Secretary for opera-

tions Arnel de Mesa said the cost of damage is expected to further increase as reports from the field are ongoing.

De Mesa said the affected regions are the Cordilleras, Calabarzon, Mimaropa and Caraga.

He gave assurance that there is enough supply of rice, meat products and vegetables despite the damage to the agriculture sector.

"We are expecting that the damage will increase in the next few days as our personnel are on the ground to gather and validate data," De Mesa said.

In Occidental Mindoro alone, the DA said 2,000 hectares of rice fields were destroyed. Losses were pegged at P20 million.

De Mesa said damage to cornfields in Agusan del Sur was estimated at P18 million.

"The typhoon started in the eastern portion so it caused flooding in Agusan del Sur, affecting corn production," De Mesa said.

The DA said it is waiting for reports on damage incurred in Ilocos, Cagayan Valley and Central Luzon.

"These are the top three producing regions when it comes to palay production," De Mesa said.

In Bulacan, damage to agriculture was estimated at P17 million.

Ma. Gloria Carillo, provincial agriculturist of Bulacan, said 485.69 hectares of rice fields worth P9.8 million were affected.

At least 39.73 hectares planted with vegetables worth P5.9 million were damaged.

Losses to the fishery sector were estimated at P1.6 million.

He said the DA has a quick response fund of P1 billion that can be used to provide assistance to affected farmers.

De Mesa said the DA would also distribute seedlings and fertilizer discount vouchers to affected farmers.

Under the National Rice Program, the DA is projecting 67 days of buffer stock by the end of the year.

— With Ramon Efren Lazaro





## DOJ: 3 or 4 main players running 'sophisticated' smuggling network

BY ASHZEL HACHERO

JUSTICE Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla yesterday said there could be as many as 20 individuals involved in the smuggling of onion and garlic in the country but only three or four can be considered as main players.

In an interview with CNN Philippines, Remulla said the smugglers operate a "sophisticated network" that controls everything from cornering the supply of onion and garlic in the local market to the operation of cold storage facilities and importation.

On Wednesday, the government official said the Department of Justice (DOJ) is following up leads

on the supposed involvement of former and current government officials in the illegal entry of agricultural goods, particularly onion and garlic, into the country.

"Yung onion, as many as 20 players, pero ang main players is tatlo hanggang apat (In the smuggling of onions, there are as many as 20 players but there are only three or four main players). We have identified (them), we will file cases in due time. We are just verifying their modus," Remulla said.

"Very sophisticated ang set up nila (They have a very sophisticated set up) and they have mastered the field, from planting season and how to control the supply, paano gamitin ang mga cold storage (how

to use cold storage facilities). It's a micro-managed industry and the cartel have the money to buy all the harvest and they control all imports. That is why the system is compromised," he said.

Remulla said he will ask officials from the Bureau of Customs (BOC) and the Department of Agriculture (DA) to explain why they have not been able to track the activities of the smuggling syndicates.

"We will have the BOC explain how this is happening. Hindi puwedeng hindi ito alam ng BOC at sa DA, may problema rin sa import permits (It is impossible for the

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### DOJ

BOC not to know about this, and for the DA, there are also issues on the import permits," he said, adding the BOC leadership is cooperating in the DOJ probe.

On Tuesday, Remulla said "billions of pesos" in bribe money could have already changed hands as the onion-garlic smuggling operations have been operating for 15 years already, or since 2008.

He said then DOJ will ask the BOC, Bureau of Plant Industry and other regulatory agencies involved in the granting of import permits for explanation and to provide the necessary documents in the ongoing probe on the smuggling of agricultural products.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., in his second State of the Nation Address last Monday, warned smugglers and hoarders of agricultural products that their days are already numbered.

Marcos said the government will file charges against the smugglers and hoarders as he called on Congress to amend the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act.

Remulla previously said they have the names of those allegedly behind the smuggling activities, adding these are also the same names that have previously cropped up during separate hearings conducted by the Senate and the House of Representatives.

To recall, one of the traders who had so far been named in the congressional hearings was Lilia Cruz, who was identified as the operator of the biggest onion cartel in the country, an allegation the latter has denied.

Last year, Sen. Raffy Tulfo also identified one Michael Yang, an Andrew Chang, Lea Cruz and a Manuel Tan as the individuals allegedly behind agricultural smuggling in the country.

The DOJ has formed an Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Task Force along with a special team of prosecutors "primarily focused on protecting the entire agricultural sector, not only the onion industry."

Among the members of the task force are the Office of the Prosecutor General headed by Prosecutor General Benedicto Malcontento, Fadullon and the National Bureau of Investigation headed by Director Medardo de Lemos.

Sen. Imee Marcos asked economic managers to explain why the prices of commodities have not gone down despite a drop in the inflation rate and the importation of agricultural products.

Speaking at the Kapihan sa Senado media forum, Marcos said the high costs of onion

and sugar could already be "self-inflicted."

"Talaga bang bumababa ang presyo kapag nag-i-import? Yun ang tanong (Do prices of these commodities really go down when we import? That is the question). Sobrang mahal pa rin ng mga bilihin. Bumababa ang inflation, pero nagsimula ito sa mataas na patong patong, pero hindi pa rin nararamdaman talaga (Prices of commodities remain very high. Inflation rate started high but it has gone down, but its effects have not been felt by the people)," Marcos said.

Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) show that the country's inflation rate ballooned to 8.7 percent in January this year, from 8.1 percent in December 2022. However, it has gone down to 6.6 percent in April, and dipped further to 6.1 percent in May this year.

The DA has allowed the importation of 400,000 metric tons of sugar last February ahead of a sugar order, in what it said was meant to lower the prices of the commodity in the local market.

The DA also allowed the importation of onions after its local market prices shot up to as much as P780 per kilo during the holiday season last year. It said the importation will cut down prices to P70 to P80 per kilo.

But despite a slowdown in inflation rate and importation, Marcos said prices of the agricultural commodities have remained high, with red onion still at P140 per kilo, white onion at P200 per kilo, sugar at more than P100 per kilo. The prices of pork have also not gone down. — *With Raymond Africa*





# P30B smuggled goods seized in 654 operations

BY ANGELA CELIS

THE Bureau of Customs (BOC) has seized a total of P30.1 billion worth of smuggled goods from the start of the year up to July 25, the agency said in a statement, as it remains committed to seize illegal and smuggled goods entering the country.

The BOC said yesterday that amount was the result of 654 seizure operations during the given period. The seized goods include various agricultural products amounting to over P2.9 billion.

In the same statement, the BOC said it takes the President's State of the Nation Address as a call to action.

"We reaffirm our commitment to addressing the pressing issues of smuggling and hoarding of agricultural products in our country. We stand fully supportive of the President's directives and will collaborate closely in the investigation he has ordered," the BOC said.

To bolster efforts in curbing illegal activities, the BOC said it is set to implement a series of proactive measures.

"We will enhance both pre-arrival and post-arrival technical targeting and fraud detection mechanisms for imported goods. Investing in additional equipment and providing



**Spot checks.** A series of inspections on six warehouses in Metro Manila on April 12, 2023 led to the discovery of P150 million worth of agricultural products, including frozen meat and fresh fruits. (BOC Photo)

capacity building for our personnel that will further strengthen our intelligence and enforcement capabilities," the BOC said.

"In our pursuit of effective enforcement, we will intensify collaboration, joint operations, and information sharing with local and

international law enforcement and regulatory agencies, including but

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not limited to the International Criminal Police Organization, National Bureau of Investigation, Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, Philippine Coast Guard, Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, Food and Drug Administration, Department of Environment and Natural Resources,

Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Agriculture, Department of Social Welfare and Development, among others," it added.

The BOC noted its commitment to expedite the prosecution of filed cases before the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Professional Regulation

Commission.

"Additionally, through DOJ, we will strive to increase the conviction rate of smugglers, serving as a deterrent to others involved in such illicit activities," it said.

In maintaining the integrity of its processes, the BOC said its Account Management Office (AMO) has processed the ac-

creditation of 7,733 importers and 1,263 customs brokers from January 1 to July 25.

Simultaneously, AMO revoked the accreditation of 95 importers and 36 customs brokers due to violations of customs laws, rules and regulations.

Over the same period, the agency said, seven show-cause

orders have been issued against erring BOC personnel, while 66 BOC employees are currently undergoing investigation by the Customs Intelligence and Investigation Service.

"The BOC remains committed in protecting the integrity of our borders, ensuring compliance with customs laws, and foster-

ing a secure environment for the nation's economic growth," the agency said.

"We will work diligently to implement these measures and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to achieve our common goal of eradicating smuggling and hoarding of agricultural products," it added.



# Malaya Business Insight

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## 11 dead from 'Egay'

BY VICTOR REYES

AT least 11 people died due to the onslaught of typhoon "Egay," mostly from landslides in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), officials said yesterday.

Four of the fatalities died after a rain-induced landslide buried their house in Lower Abatan in Buguias town in Benguet on Wednesday afternoon.

The Office of Civil-CAR named the fatalities as Hossana Tumpap, 2; Camila Dulot, 5; Jasmine Dulot, 12; and Marjorie Tumpap, 30.

"As of now, we have four confirmed deaths," Benguet Gov. Melchor Diclas said in a radio interview. He added one person was reported missing in the province.

"Their house was buried in the landslide caused by heavy rains. Part of the mountain near their house collapsed, burying their (victims') house," said Abner Lawangen, chief of the Benguet provincial disaster risk reduction and management office.

Frankie Cortez, chief of the operations section of OCD-CAR, said two others died from land-

slides in the region -- one in Baguio City and the other in Bontoc town in Mountain Province.

Gov. Jeremias Singson said two died in his province. One of the fatalities died of electrocution while the other drowned due to flashflood.

Singson said "many" were injured in the province and have been given treatment.

Sunshine Asuncion information officer of the OCD-Cagayan Valley, said a vendor died after she was hit by a fallen tree in Ramon town Isabela.

One died in Cardona, Rizal due to a flashflood. This was previously reported by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

In a radio interview, NDRRMC spokesman Edgar Posadas said they are also validating information about a death in Negros Occidental. He did not say the cause of death.

Singson said Ilocos Sur incurred heavy damage from Egay. He said two bridges were damaged, and their evacuation centers are full but

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## 11 DEAD

did not give numbers of displaced.

Singson said the province was placed under a state of calamity on Wednesday night.

Diclas said many roads in Benguet were initially closed as they were blocked by debris. He said some of these were already opened after clearing operation.

On whether they will place Benguet under a state of calamity, Diclas said: "We are still looking into it now. According to the provincial council, they will declare state of calamity if there is a need."

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said Egay exited PAR yester-

day morning. Egay made landfall in Fuga Island in Aparri, Cagayan and Dalupiri Island in Calayan, Cagayan on Wednesday morning.

As of 4 p.m. yesterday, Egay was some 280 km west northwest of Itbayat, Cagayan, with maximum sustained winds of 150 kph near the center and gustiness of up to 185 kph. It was moving west northwest at 10 kph.

Batanes, northern portion of Apayao, and the northwestern portion of Cagayan are under Signal No. 1.

PAGASA is monitoring a low pressure outside PAR. It is forecast to enter the PAR either on Saturday or Sunday.

If it enters PAR and intensifies into a tropical depression, it will be

named "Falcon."

## CAPSIZED BOAT

The Philippine Coast Guard is conducting search and rescue operations for four PCG personnel whose boat capsized in Aparri, Cagayan on Wednesday afternoon.

The PCG said the PCG personnel, aboard an aluminum boat, were on the way to respond to a distressed tugboat.

"While navigating Cagayan River, their aluminum boat capsized due to strong winds and waves at the height of typhoon Egay," the PCG said of the missing personnel.

A situation report from the NDRRMC said Egay has affected

89,639 families or 328,356 individuals in Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Bicol, Western Visayas, Northern Mindanao, Soccsksargen, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, and CAR.

Of the number, the NDRRMC said 10,796 families or 37,926 individuals were displaced. The number of displaced population was down to 7,812 families or 26,697 individuals as of yesterday morning.

The NDRRMC monitored at least 175 flooding incidents in 10 regions, of which 99 have already subsided.

Posadas said some areas in the Ilocos provinces remain flooded as of yesterday morning. He said search and rescue operations are

ongoing for affected residents.

He said some areas in Central Luzon were also still flooded.

## DAMAGE TO AGRI

Initial cost of damage to the agriculture sector was at P53.1 million as of noon yesterday, according to the Department of Agriculture.

It said the total cost of damage is equivalent to 1,871 metric tons of goods tended by 2,303 farmers in 3,185 hectares of affected areas.

Bulk of the damage is to corn at P31.1 million, followed by rice at P20.8 million, and livestock and poultry at P1.2 million.

The DA said it is providing assistance to affected farmers and fishers in the form of rice, corn

and assorted vegetable seeds; drugs and biologics for livestock and poultry; and fingerlings assistance to affected fisherfolk from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

The government has distributed P11.34 million worth of food and non-food items to 11 regions affected by Egay, said the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

Social Welfare Secretary Rex Gatchalian yesterday ordered the delivery of 20,000 more family food packs to Regions I (Ilocos), II (Cagayan Valley) and the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), which were heavily affected by Egay. — *With Jed Macapagal and Jocelyn Montemayor*



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## PH, Brunei exploring agri deals

THE Philippines and Brunei are exploring collaboration in agriculture following a meeting last Wednesday between Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban and Brunei ambassador Megawati Manan.

In particular, the Philippines is eyeing opportunities to export local Jasmine and sticky rice variants to Brunei, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said in a statement yesterday.

DA said the parties are also looking at scholarship opportunities and collaborative hybrid rice research at the Universiti Teknologi Brunei – Center for Research on AgriFood Science and Technology, which is the sole research center for agriculture, food science and nutrition in Brunei.

DA said during the meeting, Manan laid out possibilities of exporting Halal beef, lamb and other meat products to the Philippines as well as opening

Brunei to Filipino industries as a production hub of Halal products.

In turn, Panganiban proposed the export and promotion of Philippine coconut peat, coconut oil, sweet corn, cacao, pineapples, mangos, avocados, durian, fishery products and poultry products to Brunei markets, especially through the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

The countries also explored the possibility of renewing the memorandum of understanding on food security and cultural cooperation which was signed in 2011 and had expired in 2016 which manifested a collaboration towards the realization of the food basket initiatives of the BIMP-EAGA as well as the development of the agriculture, fisheries, food processing and Halal industries between the parties.





**GSIS EYES INVESTMENT IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL MECHANIZATION** – Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) President and General Manager Wick Veloso met with Department of Agriculture – Rice Industry Development Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian to discuss GSIS's possible investment in agricultural mechanization which, according to President Marcos in his second State-of-the Nation Address (SONA), is a vital key to food security. According to Veloso, GSIS is looking at investing in sustainable agricultural mechanization that takes into consideration farming tools which are environment-friendly, reasonably priced, and adaptable to local conditions and durable.

## GSIS plans to invest in agriculture automation

By CHINO S. LEYCO

The Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) has announced its intention to invest in agricultural automation with the aim of enhancing agricultural output in the country.

In a statement, Jose Arnulfo "Wick" Veloso, GSIS president and general manager said the pension fund is considering sustainable agricultural mechanization as an investment opportunity.

Although Veloso did not disclose specific details about the investment, the GSIS chief revealed that he recently held a meeting with Department of Agriculture – Rice Industry Development Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian to discuss the plan.

During his recent State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Marcos emphasized the significance of agricultural mechanization as one of the key programs to enhance agricultural production.

In line with this, Veloso said the GSIS' potential investments will prioritize farming tools that are environmentally friendly, affordable, adaptable to local conditions, and durable.

During his SONA, President Marcos highlighted significant advancements in the agriculture sector during his first year in office, noting a 2.2-percent growth in the local farm industry in the first quarter of the year.

The President attributed this growth to various measures implemented, including consolidation,

modernization, mechanization, and the enhancement of value chains.

Additionally, the government has undertaken timely and calibrated importation of select food products to guarantee the nation's food security, the chief executive added.

Moreover, President Marcos emphasized that the government's approach to achieving food security is guided by a balanced consideration of both scientific advancements and ecological principles.

Despite the passage of the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act of 1997, a recent study conducted by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) revealed that the technology gap in the agricultural sector has continued to widen.

The study, citing data from the International Food Policy Research Institute, showed that the Philippines has lagged behind most Southeast Asian countries in terms of total factor productivity between 2001 and 2014.

PIDS said this suggested a slowdown in technological progress during that period.

Researchers at PIDS also noted that while there have been some improvements in productivity, particularly in rice and corn production, the Philippines still falls behind other countries in terms of both output outcomes and input utilization.

The study highlighted the need for further advancements in agricultural technology to bridge the gap and catch up with regional counterparts.





## 'Egay' farm damage hits P 53M in 2 days

By Jordeene B. Lagare  
@jordeenelagare

From the previous estimate of P255,000, the damage wrought by Typhoon "Egay" (international name: Doksuri) on the essential agriculture sector has gone up to P53.1 million as of Thursday, with the Department of Agriculture (DA) saying it expects the figure to further go up in the coming days.

"Definitely, we are expecting the amount to increase in the succeeding hours and days as our ground personnel are going around and gathering reports on the damage caused by the typhoon. We are validating other reports already," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said.

Based on a DA bulletin, the typhoon affected 2,303 farmers in the following regions: Cordillera; Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon provinces); Mimaropa (Mindoro Oriental and Occidental, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan provinces) and Caraga (Agusan del Sur and Norte,

Surigao del Sur and Norte provinces, and Dinagat Islands).

The volume of production loss was estimated at 1,871 metric tons spanning 3,185 hectares of agricultural areas. Affected commodities included rice, corn, livestock and poultry with the values subject to validation.

Among the subsectors, corn recorded the largest damage at P31.1 million—equivalent to a volume loss of 1,837 MT and an area of 1,176 ha. Next was rice at P20.8 million and livestock and poultry at P1.2 million.

Federation of Free Farmers national manager Raul Montemayor said it was too soon to tell if Egay would affect domestic rice production and supply in the coming months as most rice crops were only in the first month of the four-month production cycle.

De Mesa said that among the affected provinces, Occidental Mindoro sustained the biggest amount of damage at P20 million, covering almost 2,000 ha of rice.

In Agusan del Sur, the ty-

phoon hit corn areas with losses pegged at around P18 million.

According to de Mesa, the DA does not expect Egay to affect the retail prices and supply of agricultural products since the crops damaged by the typhoon were still in the early growth stage.

### Gov't interventions

Still, the department is prepared to provide interventions to affected producers, such as rice, corn and assorted vegetable seeds for farmers; drugs and biologics for livestock and poultry; and fingerlings for fishers.

De Mesa said the Department of Budget and Management had already added an additional P1 billion to the quick response fund to help out farmers and fisherfolk affected by Egay or the El Niño phenomenon. Those affected can also tap funding through the Survival and Recovery Loan Program of the Agricultural Credit Policy Council with a maximum loan of P25,000 payable in three years at no interest. **INQ**





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## GSIS considering farm mechanization investments

THE Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) said it is considering investing in sustainable agricultural mechanization projects to help the Philippines achieve food security.

GSIS President and General Manager Jose Arnulfo A. Veloso met with the Department of Agriculture's Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development Leocadio S. Sebastian to discuss the possible investments, the pension fund said in a statement on Thursday.

Mr. Veloso said GSIS is looking to invest in sustainable agricultural mechanization that uses farming tools which are environment-friendly, reasonably priced, adaptable to local conditions, and durable.

"The President stressed in his SONA (State of the Nation Address) that among the flagship programs to boost agricultural production is agricultural mechanization," the GSIS said.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. said in his second SONA that the government has given 28,000 units of machinery to farmers. — **Aaron Michael C. Sy**





## Pasay raids yield smuggled frozen meat from China valued at P2M

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it has seized frozen meat products from China valued at P2 million following raids conducted in Pasay City.

In a statement, the DA said it confiscated around 1,034 kilos of frozen meat products, including Peking ducks, black chickens, and doves in three establishments on July 21.

In a joint operation with Pasay City authorities, the National Meat Inspection Service, and the Philippine Coast Guard, the seizures included 700 kilos of smuggled frozen Peking

ducks, black chickens, doves, and other meat products from a restaurant and mini-mart.

The team also found 334 kilos of imported frozen Peking ducks, rabbits, doves, yellow chickens, suckling pigs, and other meat in a restaurant.

The restaurant could present no legal documentation attesting that the meat products were properly imported.

The seized products are subject to immediate destruction "in order to prevent them from posing health hazards to the public," the DA said.

"All-in-all, the apprehended smuggled products were valued at P2 million — a clear violation of the Republic Act No. 10845 or the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016," it said.

Under the law, large-scale agricultural smuggling occurs when at least P1 million worth of sugar, corn, pork, poultry, garlic, onion, carrots, fish, and cruciferous vegetables — either raw, processed, or preserved — is illegally brought into the country. — **Sheldeem Joy Talavera**





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## DA reports initial P53.1M farm damage after 'Egay'

**T**HE Department of Agriculture (DA) on Thursday reported an initial P53.1 million worth of farm damage following typhoon "Egay's" onslaught.

In its latest bulletin, the DA said the amount of damage was recorded in four regions.

"Based on the assessment of DA Regional Field Offices (RFOs) in CAR [Cordillera Administrative Region], Calabarzon and Mimaropa and Region XIII [Caraga], damage and losses have been reported amounting to PHP53.1 million affecting 2,303 farmers, with volume of production loss at 1,871 metric tons [MT] and 3,185 hectares of agricultural areas," it said.

"Affected commodities include rice, corn, livestock and poultry. These values are subject to validation," the report added.

"Most of the damage and losses were incurred at seedling, newly planted, and vegetative stages of rice," the DA report added.

"The DA, through its RFOs, is monitoring the effects of supertyphoon Egay and conducting an assessment of damage and losses brought in the agriculture and fisheries sector," it said.

Moreover, the DA is also coordinating with concerned government agencies, local governments and other disaster response offices on available resources for assistance in response to the typhoon's impact.

The following forms of assistance are available for distribution to affected farmers and fishers: rice, corn and assorted vegetable seeds; drugs and biologics for livestock and poultry; fingerlings assistance to affected fisherfolk from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR); Survival and Recovery (SURE) Loan Program from the Agricultural Credit Policy Council (ACPC) with loanable amount of up to P25,000 payable in three years at zero interest; and Quick Response Fund (QRF) for the rehabilitation of affected areas.

Moreover, on its Thursday's weather forecast, Pagasa said that Egay continues

to weaken over the Luzon strait west of Batanes, while the southwest monsoon will be affecting Southern Luzon and Visayas.

The weather bureau said that there is possible flooding or landslides because of moderate to intense rains or severe thunderstorms.

The social action arm of the Catholic Church, Caritas Philippines, meanwhile, issued an appeal to help communities devastated by Egay in Northern Luzon.

Caritas Philippines President Bishop Jose Colin Bagaforo urged "unaffected" dioceses to send emergency relief to typhoon-stricken areas.

"They will be needing food, shelter materials, water, medicine, and other emergency supplies. Affected communities will also be needing our prayers," said Bishop Bagaforo.

According to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) on Wednesday, there were 58-recorded flooded areas in five regions and 16 rain-induced landslides.

Caritas Philippines has already activated a quick reaction team to assess the impacts of the typhoon, Bishop Bagaforo confirmed.

At the same time, other social action centers of affected dioceses were told "to send updates and situational reports" to Caritas Philippines.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), for its part, has already prepared food packs in different regions, said Secretary Rex Gatchalian on Wednesday at a media briefing.

Gatchalian stated that 1.3 million family food packs are pre-positioned in 16 regions, and around 80,000 to 100,000 are placed in Regions 1, 2, and CAR.

"*Bago pa dumating ang bagyo, pinaghahandaan na natin* and even other disasters like earthquake and '*young katulad ng nangyari sa Mayon*,'" said Gatchalian. **Raadee S. Sausa, Patrick V. Miguel with PNA**



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## BIR shuts down 'well-connected' flour distributor

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

[@jearcalas](#)

**T**HE Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) said it shut down a major flour distributor in the country after it confirmed that the firm was involved in tax fraud activities.

A statement from the BIR announced the bureau has placed JPoon and Sons Corp. under its "Oplan Kandado" (lock-up) program after investigations revealed the DA-licensed firm has unregistered warehouses and issues unregistered invoices.

The BIR noted that the firm is "connected to one of the major manufacturers of flour in the Philippines through their interlocking board of directors and majority stockholders." The bureau, however, opted to keep under wraps the name of the "major" flour manufacturer.

The BIR explained its "Oplan Kandado" program is pursuant to its Revenue Memorandum Order 3-2009, which is based on the Tax Code.

The BIR said its investigations re-



THIS photo courtesy of the Bureau of Internal Revenue shows BIR Commissioner Romeo D. Lumagui Jr. (center) at a warehouse connected with JPoon and Sons Corp., which the BIR shut down after finding irregularities in its transactions with the tax agency.

vealed that JPoon has a warehouse/sales outlet and a back-office site in Quezon City, both of which are unregistered. JPoon also issues unregistered invoices in its sales operations across branches; "and this has been going on for years," the BIR added.

The BIR alleges that the company has only registered manual receipts without a single registered comput-

erized accounting system as part of a scheme of issuing unregistered receipts.

"In this manner, JPoon is shielding its actual inventory to greatly reduce its tax liabilities," the bureau said.

The BIR said it confirmed the issuance of unregistered receipts through a test buy it did recently as

part of a Mission Order issued by BIR Commissioner Romeo D. Lumagui Jr.

"It was found that the unregistered warehouse in Quezon City contains thousands of bags of flour including sugar and other bakery products," it said.

The BIR recently conducted simultaneous enforcement operations involving the multiple branches of JPoon across several locations. The bureau is also investigating the firm's wheat importation activities, which are used as raw materials by its sister company for flour manufacturing.

The BIR has seized all the unregistered computers, accounting software, servers, and unregistered receipts being used by JPoon in its "illegal" operations.

"We want a level playing field for businesses in the Philippines. Big companies like JPoon should comply with all BIR issuances. All companies should. Non-payment of taxes should not be treated as a business advantage," Lumagui was quoted in a statement as saying.





## For the fund of it

THE Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) has been sounding the alarm bell regarding the occurrence of the El Niño phenomenon that is expected to impact the country later this year or early next year.

El Niño is a weather phenomenon that is officially described as an "irregularly recurring flow of unusually warm surface waters from the Pacific Ocean toward and along the western coast of South America that prevents upwelling of nutrient-rich cold deep water and that disrupts typical regional and global weather patterns."

From the layman's perspective, El Niño is associated with prolonged summer, high temperature and little rainfall. It is the little



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rainfall that worries most of the Filipinos because they associate it with inadequate supply of potable water and insufficient water for irrigation.

In particular, because palay (unmilled rice) is a freshwater sucker and rice is the staple food of the Filipinos, there is serious concern that we will experience a significant decline in palay production and other agricultural commodities which are dependent on rain for irrigation. It is estimated that we need more than 3 cubic meters

➤ **Finer B2**

Angat reservoir and diminishing potable water for Metro Manila consumers.

But little rainfall does not mean a lack of water. We have technologies that can extract water from our aquifers (underground water layers). Moreover, the El Niño phenomenon will hit regions in the country in varying degrees. Some will still have enough rainfall while others will not.

Pagasa's weather forecasting is not a precise science but one can already predict, based on past experiences, that areas like the Ilocos region in the north and Soccsksargen (South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos) in the south will experience the brunt of the El Niño, with varying impacts on Bulacan, Tarlac and Pangasinan due to declining water levels in Angat and Pantabangan dams.

Note that for some crops, El Niño might be a blessing, provided sufficient water is extracted from aquifers, because prolonged heat will facilitate photosynthesis. A case in point are the greenhouse facilities where the temperature is kept at 37 degrees centigrade to ensure continued photosynthesis to accelerate the growth of the plant and its harvest.

A prime example of an upscale experience in agricultural production with an El Niño type of agro-climatic environment is that of Israeli agriculture. Little rainfall in that region did not stop Israel from becoming a world-class ag-

ricultural producer. The use of drip irrigation and state-of-the-art greenhouse facilities allowed the use of that country's scarce water in the most judicious manner.

Also note that palay production actually rose in 2002, 2004, 2007 and 2017, which were El Niño years. The trick is to tap water from aquifers to ensure water supply during the driest period of the year using tubewell technology. There are also rice varieties produced by the Philippine Rice Research Institute, in collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute, that are drought resistant and hence will be the highly suitable variety to plant in relatively arid areas.

For crops like corn and vegetables that do not require massive amounts of water to grow, drip and sprinkler irrigation is the most suitable. But extraction of water supply from our aquifers needs a thorough analysis of the nature and status of the aquifer in the area to be served to ensure continued supply of fresh water and avoid depletion.

This will require an analysis of aquifer area per region and hence, more work on the part of the DA. The DA might not have the expertise for this challenging task and will have to tap expertise from outside.

When I was still serving as vice-chancellor of UP Los Baños (UPLB), there was a unit in its former College of Agro-Engineering dedicated to agro-meteorological studies. Its late former dean and former UPLB Chancellor Wilfredo David was a strong advocate of shallow tubewell technology because of its low cost and high return to investment.

He was able to convince the DA to adopt it. However, the DA did not do its job properly of examining the nature and status of aquifers in the areas where they installed shallow tubewells. The result was that tubewells were not working during the dry season when they were needed most and functional during the wet season when there was sufficient water from rainfall.

This resulted in a serious setback to the promotion of the shallow tubewell technology. But experiences of arid countries in Africa and parts of India showed, if combined with the proper analysis of the aquifer or construction of

rainwater catchment and harvesting areas in the most appropriate sites, it is still the best and the least costly technology in providing adequate supplies of water in dryland areas.

If we can just apply the proper science in agricultural production, there will be solutions to challenges, even those posed by the El Niño phenomenon. Securing more funds is not enough. It is the way those funds are used that can really solve our agricultural problems.

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■ **FINER FROM B1**

## For the

of fresh water to produce a kilo of palay.

Consequently, various government agencies, particularly the Department of Agriculture (DA), are preparing measures to mitigate the negative impacts of El Niño. Most of the DA units concerned with this deviant weather phenomenon are submitting various proposals for additional funding by the government, arguing that if they are implemented properly and in time, these will lessen the adverse impacts of El Niño.

Unfortunately, the typical response of some DA officials to solve the agricultural problems posed by El Niño is to add more money to their respective units or programs. This ignores the fact that more than 20 percent of the DA's annual budget is unspent due to low implementation capability and slow bureaucratic procedures in the release of funds.

Note that El Niño does not mean the lack of water. There is still rainfall but it is lesser during an El Niño year than the annual average. That is seriously worrisome for the Metro Manila residents who are dependent on water supply from Angat dam. Little rainfall will mean a decline in the





## LPA to enter on Saturday

BY ARLIE O. CALALO,  
JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL AND REINA C. TOLENTINO

**T**HE Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) said Thursday a tropical depression outside the Philippine Area of Responsibility will likely enter on Saturday.

It will be named "Falcon."

Weather specialist Ana Clauren-Jorda told *The Manila Times* in a phone interview that the tropical depression was spotted past 3 p.m. Thursday 1,560 kilometers east of Eastern Visayas.

Moving west-northwest at 20 kilometers per hour (kph), it has maximum sustained winds of 55 kph near the center and gustiness of up to 70 kph, she said.

"Falcon" will be the sixth storm to hit the country this year and the third this month.

However, "Falcon" will not be as powerful as Typhoon "Egay" that reached super typhoon category.

"We have a forecast that it may reach the typhoon category but it will not be as strong as Super Typhoon Egay and it may not last for few days," Clauren-Jorda said.

Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said initial damage in agriculture in four regions from Typhoon Egay reached P53.1 million.

DA Assistant Secretary for Operations Arnel de Mesa said on Thursday the affected commodities include rice, corn, livestock and poultry.

The damage were report by DA regional offices in Cordillera Administrative Region, Calabarzon

(Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon) Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan), and Caraga.

Worst hit was Occidental Mindoro, where damage to 2,000 hectares of riceland reached P20 million, de Mesa said.

Damage to corn fields in Agusan del Sur was valued at P18 million.

The DA said 2,303 farmers were affected by "Egay," and production loss was at 1,871 metric tons (MT), covering 3,185 ha of agricultural areas.

De Mesa said the damage was not extensive. "We can see that there is even a beneficial effect as water (level) increases in our dams. So as of now, the effects on supply of Egay is very minimal," he said.

He said the department does not see prices of local commodities going up.

In the House of Representatives, Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez and Tingog party-list arranged the release today, July 28, of P128.5 million in relief goods and financial aid to typhoon victims.

"We hope the aid will ease the pain and suffering of our people who are affected by the super howler," Romualdez said.

Tingog Rep. Yedda Marie Romualdez said the relief and financial aid "symbolizes the compassion of the House leadership and its commitment to help our people in distress." "We hope our kababayan (countrymen) in the north and their communities are able to recover fast from this adversity," she said.

P23.5 million will come from Romualdez's personal calamity fund which was raised partly from friends' contributions during his birthday celebration last year.

The remaining P105 million will be released from the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation (AICS) program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Ilocos Norte's first district (represented by Senior Deputy Majority Leader Ferdinand Alexander Marcos) donated P1 million cash aid, P2 million in relief goods (5,000 packs), and P10 million AICS;

Ilocos Sur's second district (Deputy Speaker Kristine Singson-Meehan) – P1 million cash, P2 million in relief goods (5,000 packs), and P10 million AICS; Cagayan's first district (Rep. Ramon Nolasco Jr.) – P2 million cash, P4 million in relief goods (10,000 packs), and P20 million AICS; Cagayan's second district (Rep. Baby Aline Vargas-Alfonso) – P1 million cash aid, P4 million relief goods (10,000 food packs), and P20 million AICS; Ilocos Sur's first district (Rep. Ronald Singson) – P5 million AICS; Cagayan's third district (Rep. Joseph "Jojo" Lara) – P1 million cash, P1 million in relief goods (2,500 food packs), and P10 million AICS; the lone district of Benguet (Rep. Eric Yap) – P10 million in AICS, P500,000 in cash aid, and P1 million in relief goods (2,500 food packs); Baguio City (Rep. Mark Go) – P500,000 cash, P1 million in relief goods (2,500 food packs), and P10 million in AICS; and Baguio City – P500,000 cash, P1 million in relief goods (1,250 food packs) and P10 million AICS.





## Customs seizes P30B worth of smuggled goods

THE Bureau of Customs (BoC) said its seizures of smuggled goods have totaled P30.1 billion as of July 25.

In a statement, the BoC said that the goods were seized in 654 separate operations. They include over P2.9 billion worth of agricultural products.

The BoC has said it generated collections of P434.169 billion in the six months to June, beating its target by 3.21%.

The BoC's collections in the half represent around 48% of its P901.3-billion full-year target.

Measures taken to improve collections include enhancing pre-arrival and post-arrival technical targeting and fraud detection for imported goods.

"Investing in additional equipment and providing capacity building for our personnel that will further strengthen our intelligence and enforcement capabilities," it added.

The agency also said it is working on intensifying "collaboration, joint operations, and information sharing with local and international law enforcement and regulatory agencies."

"The BoC is committed to expedite the prosecution of filed cases before the Department of Justice (DoJ) and Professional Regulation Commission (PRC). Additionally, through the DoJ, we will strive to increase the conviction rate of smugglers, serving as a deterrent to others involved in such illicit activities," it said.

As of July 25, the agency has processed the accreditation of 7,733 importers and 1,263 Customs brokers.

Some 95 importers and 36 Customs brokers have had their accreditation revoked "due to violations of customs laws, rules, and regulations."

— **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**





## Bogo-Medellin: Other farming operations continue

LISTED COMPANY Bogo-Medellin Milling Co., Inc. (Bomedco) on Thursday said that it is pursuing measures to address the insufficient sugarcane supply after announcing a temporary halt in its milling operations.

"We assure the public that this is a temporary concern that we intended to address in due time," the company said in a statement.

"While we are currently facing a unique situation, we want to emphasize that Bomedco remains operational in all other aspects of our business," it added.

The company said that its farming and agricultural services are still in operation.

Bomedco usually starts its milling operations between October and December of each crop year and has planned to conduct milling operations for the crop year 2022-2023, the company noted.



CHRISTINE WALKER—UNSPASH

"In preparation for this, we successfully conducted a trial run to ensure seamless milling operations," Bomedco said.

"However, due to the sugar planters' insufficient delivery of cane in a timely manner relative to our rated capacity of 2,500 tons as reported, which will render the mill operations inefficient," it added.

The company said that it is currently preparing its sugarcane for the coming milling season starting in September.

"We are diligently working on ensuring the efficient processing of our sugarcane in line with the upcoming milling season," it said.

The company earlier said that it will have no milling operations for the crop year starting January until the present due to insufficient sugarcane supply. "In effect, the company declared a temporary shutdown until further notice." — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**



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## PHL and Malaysia Halal partnership seen to open new jobs, business opportunities

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

[@joveemarie](#)

**S**PEAKER Ferdinand Martin G. Romualdez on Thursday said the partnership established between the Philippines and Malaysia in the Halal industry would create more jobs and business opportunities for people of both countries.

"The agreement between the Philippines and Malaysia to cooperate in this vital sector undoubtedly signifies a significant step towards the creation of more jobs, as well as the livelihood and business prospects of our people," Romualdez said in a news statement.

Last Tuesday, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. announced in a joint news conference with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim that they agreed to convene the next Philippines-Malaysia Joint Commission meeting to discuss priority cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including in the Halal industry.

He said that according to market research, the global halal food market size reached \$2,221.3 billion in 2022 and is expected to reach \$4,177.3 billion by 2028.

"The Halal industry holds immense potential. By working together, we can capitalize on the Halal market's vast opportunities, creating new avenues for trade, investment, and employment," Romualdez said.

Malaysia, one of the leading Halal industries in the world, has offered its expertise to train Philippine personnel and officials in this sector, particularly those in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), as well as in other areas of cooperation.

As such, Romualdez said the partnership between the two countries in the Halal industry forged during the state visit of President Marcos in Malaysia would bolster the competitiveness of our businesses, particularly in the agri-food sector.

"With President Marcos' priority

on digitalization of government processes and improved Internet connectivity, we can tap e-commerce channels and social media to market our goods globally and profit from the growing demand worldwide for Halal products," Romualdez said.

Romualdez also reiterated his commitment that the lower chamber is willing to consider measures that would help the country benefit from the revitalized ties between the Philippines and Malaysia.

"The House of Representatives stands ready to support any legislative measures necessary to facilitate the successful implementation of this bilateral cooperation in the Halal industry. We will work in tandem with the Executive branch to create an enabling environment that fosters innovation, investment, and responsible business practices," he said.

Romualdez cited, among others, House Bill 7118, which seeks to amend

Republic Act 9997, or the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos Act of 2009, to promote local Halal enterprises and product development.

Romualdez also expressed confidence that the three-day state visit of Marcos to Malaysia would generate additional benefits for the people of both countries.

According to Marcos, the forthcoming Joint Commission meeting will provide government agencies of both countries with an avenue to discuss cooperation in detail not only in the Halal industry but also on matters regarding transnational crimes, agriculture, Islamic banking, education, tourism and culture, sports, and the digital economy.

"This significant partnership is a testament to the vision and leadership of both President Marcos and Prime Minister Anwar. Let us move forward with determination and optimism, united in our pursuit of a prosperous future for both the people of the Philippines and Malaysia," Romualdez said.





## Tomato price shock hits Indian restaurants

NEW DELHI — Many Indian restaurants are cutting back on tomatoes in their popular dishes and consumer companies are ramping up production of cheaper purees that are flying off the shelves, after prices surged more than 500%.

Used widely in Indian cooking, prices of tomatoes have hit record highs in recent weeks as monsoon rains disrupted supplies at a time when seasonal production is typically low, forcing the government to organize mobile vans for subsidized sales.

Many McDonald's and Subway outlets have dropped tomatoes from their menu items, citing quality issues, but higher food prices are having a broader impact across the industry, while pushing headline inflation numbers above the central bank's medium-term target.

Consumers, already struggling with rising living costs, are desperate for cheaper options.

Milk and vegetable retailer Mother Dairy has seen a 300%

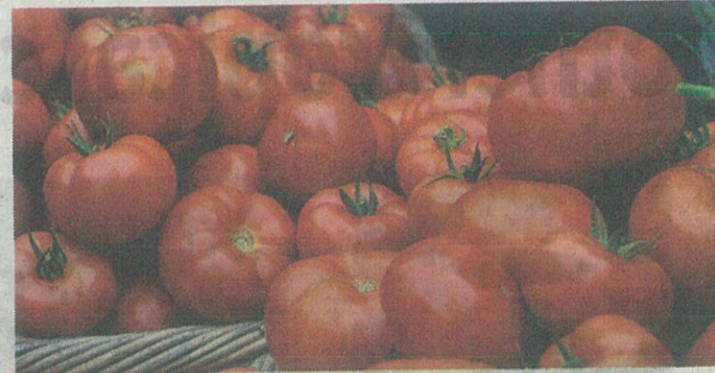
jump in tomato puree sales in the last 15 days in New Delhi, a spokesperson said. Indian consumer giant Dabur said it has ramped up production of puree to meet growing demand.

Puree sales at Tata's online shopping website BigBasket surged 175% in early July, with senior executive Seshu Kumar saying customers who earlier bought an average of 1 kg fresh tomatoes per order were buying half of that.

Amazon said demand for tomato puree on its platform rose five times over the past month, while ketchup sales rose 30%.

Packs of puree typically contain around 40% tomato paste and the rest water, and cost 130 rupees/kg. Tomato prices on Wednesday in New Delhi were 199 rupees/kg, from around 30 rupees in April. Puree prices have so far not changed.

"With the prices going over 100 Indian rupees (\$1.22), I tried to experiment with tomato ketchup for Indian gravies ... Not everyone



JOSEPHINE BARAN/UNSPASH

in the family liked it," said 34-year-old Pravieen Sridhar, who runs a laundry business in Chennai.

Google Trends data shows the number of online searches for terms "tomato puree" and "tomato puree 1kg price" in recent weeks in India have been highest in the last five years.

Crop damage and transportation woes due to rain have also led to a rise in prices of other vegetables. Surging food prices accelerated India's annual retail inflation rate in June to 4.81%, snapping four months of easing

and fuelling bets that the central bank will keep interest rates high into mid-2024.

Vegetables are a politically-sensitive commodity in India, where average per-capita income was estimated to be around \$200 per month in 2022-23. Price spikes in onions — another key ingredient used in Indian cooking — contributed to the fall of more than one state government in the past.

Food sellers — big and small — are battling high tomato prices.

In a New Delhi business district, Birju, who sells a cheap

bread-and-pea street food which typically comes with tomatoes, said he now uses the expensive item only as a garnish, and only when people push for it.

"Customers understand I am not using it because I haven't increased prices," he said, gesturing to a single piece of tomato on his cart, as he cooked on a hot afternoon.

Pradeep Shetty of the Hotel and Restaurant Association of Western India said many outlets have stopped using fresh tomatoes in salads and are switching to more purees.

"Chefs are also trying to find ways to bring the sourness of tomatoes through other agents like tamarind."

At a restaurant in south Delhi, owner Raj Kumar has resorted to a 12% hike in prices of tomato-based, cottage cheese gravies which are devoured by customers

"If the rates remain like this, we might have to think about our prices again," he said. — **Reuters**





## Putin hosts African leaders as grain deal collapse threatens food security

**P**RESIDENT Vladimir Putin is hosting a summit with African leaders that's intended to demonstrate Russia's growing influence on the continent. Instead, it's turning into a measure of the Kremlin's diminishing power as his war in Ukraine drags on.

The two-day meeting starting Thursday in St. Petersburg takes place amid criticism in Africa of the impact on global food prices of Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea grain deal and attacks on Ukrainian port facilities. In contrast to the first Russia-Africa summit in 2019 when Putin met 43 African heads of state, the Kremlin said 17 are due to attend this time.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov blamed "unprecedented pressure" by the US and its allies for the low turnout. Putin's foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov highlighted participation by lower-level officials representing 49 countries despite arm-twisting by Russia's opponents.

"Putin is imitating the Soviet Union but Putin's Russia isn't the USSR—it doesn't have the soft power or money to buy loyalty," said Andrei Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "His new friends in Africa are not proving reliable."

The summit takes place 10 days after Russia ended the Ukraine grain-export deal brokered by the United Nations and Turkey that had ensured safe passage of almost 33 million tons of crops via the Black Sea, helping to cool surging world food prices following Russia's invasion.

It's also Putin's first in-person gathering with foreign leaders since the mutiny by Wagner mercenaries in June that posed the most serious challenge to his nearly quarter-century rule in Russia. The future of Wagner's activities in Africa, which has given the Kremlin a low-cost instrument to wield influence on the continent, is also in question amid the political fallout from the revolt.

The collapse of the grain deal threatens to exacerbate food-security concerns in Africa, where almost half of nations import more than a third of their wheat from Ukraine and Russia, according to the International Centre for Migration Policy Development.

Russia had repeatedly threatened to quit the agreement, claiming commitments to facilitate exports of Russian grain and fertilizers weren't being fulfilled. Despite its complaints, Russia is shipping record volumes of wheat and fertilizer exports are recovering to pre-war levels.

Egypt, whose president, Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, is attending the summit, criticized Russia's withdrawal. A top Kenyan official labeled Putin's decision a "stab on the back" for drought-afflicted African countries hit by rising food prices.

"We understand the importance

**The collapse of the grain deal threatens to exacerbate food-security concerns in Africa, where almost half of nations import more than a third of their wheat from Ukraine and Russia, according to the International Centre for Migration Policy Development.**

of uninterrupted food supplies for the socio-economic development and political stability of the African states," Putin said in an article on the Kremlin website. The Kremlin said Putin plans bilateral talks with all the African heads of state participating in the summit.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who's due to meet with Putin on Saturday, has also previously highlighted the issue in talks with his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts. Ramaphosa, whose ruling African National Congress has close ties to Moscow dating back to Soviet support for the anti-Apartheid movement, called the summit a chance to "foster mutually beneficial cooperation" between Russia and Africa.

The Russian leader conceded last week that he can't travel to South Africa for a meeting in August of BRICS states, amid concerns over the risk of possible arrest for alleged war crimes in Ukraine under a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. A peace initiative in Russia and Ukraine begun by a group of African leaders in June also appears to be going nowhere.

The limits of Russia's reach is indicated by its Africa trade reaching only \$18 billion in 2022, dwarfed by China's \$282 billion in commercial exchanges that year with African nations.

The St. Petersburg summit is important for the Kremlin despite the reduced attendance from African leaders, said Maria Snegovaya, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "Showcasing their remaining ties with certain regions is of crucial importance to Putin just to demonstrate that, first of all, Russia is not isolated; it remains an important international player, a great power," she said.

African leaders will be looking to impress on Putin the need to resume grain exports through the Black Sea, said Sanusha Naidu, a Cape Town-based political analyst with the Institute for Global Dialogue. "It is going to be problematic if this is just a summit that is mainly about Russia and not about Africa," she said. *With assistance from Julius Domoney, Mike Cohen, Paul Richardson and S'thembele Cele / Bloomberg*





## Editorial

### Fixing the 'broken' global food system

UNITED Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres opened a food system summit in Rome earlier this week by highlighting a glaring incongruity.

"In a world of plenty, it is outrageous that people continue to suffer and die from hunger," Guterres said.

More than 780 million people go hungry, although nearly one-third of the world's food is wasted or lost, he said.

That's not all. While 462 million people are underweight, 2 billion are overweight or obese, Guterres said.

Clearly, the world's food system is "broken," he said.

The three-day summit will focus on how to fix the system. But the UN chief warned that finding solutions will not be easy.

Producing, processing, transporting and consuming food make up a chain that is constantly under strain from debilitating events like extreme weather, pandemics and conflicts.

Today, the chain is approaching breaking point.

It's hard to imagine that less than 30 years ago, the world was basking in record harvests, rising incomes and falling food prices.

The shift has been dramatic in just the last five years and continues to worsen, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Food insecurity has "consistently increased" since 2014, when the rate of undernourishment was at 8.6 percent. And between 2018 and 2019, the number of hungry people grew by 10 million, the FAO reported.

Covid-19 contributed to the surge in global hunger in 2020. The UN reported that during that year, about 811 million people, or one out of nine individuals, in the world did not get enough to eat.

The increase set back international efforts to end global hunger by 2030.

More recently, Guterres expressed deep concern over Russia's refusal to renew its grain deal with Ukraine that allowed cargo ships carrying Ukrainian grain to depart Black Sea ports.

Despite being in a state of war, Ukraine was able to ship 33 million tons of grain under the agreement, bringing down world food prices by almost 20 percent.

Now that Russia has resumed blockading Ukrainian ports, "the most vulnerable will pay the highest price," Guterres rued.

Even as hunger stalks millions, obesity has grown into a major problem.

In the Philippines, 27 million people are obese, and 30 percent of Filipino adolescents will be obese by 2030, according to a study.

The FAO explains that rising obesity does not mean improved nutrition, but an indication that food insecurity leads to poor diets and weight gain.

Guterres has proposed a multipronged approach to prop up the world's food system.

He called on governments to heed the UN's call to raise \$500 billion annually to support long-term financing for countries that need to strengthen their food systems.

He appealed to governments and businesses to explore new ways to increase the availability of fresh, healthy food for all, keeping food markets open, and lifting trade barriers and export restrictions.

Guterres also wants food systems retrofitted to be able reduce the carbon footprint of food processing, packaging, and transportation.

If no action is taken at all, the social and economic costs will hit \$12 trillion annually, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), another UN agency taking part in the summit.

The IFAD compared the needed funds with the "\$10 trillion in revenue generated by the global food industry or the \$700 billion paid in agricultural subsidies by wealthy countries."

"Without financing this transition, it's a death sentence for the planet," summit director Nadine Gbessa said.

Funding support must be backed up by political and economic initiatives. International trade barriers and rising tariffs may have to be lowered, while agricultural policies will need to be shifted towards a more "nutrition-sensitive investment," such as supporting fruit and vegetable crops, the FAO said.

For FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu, transforming food systems must conform to the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs.

Food systems must play a key role in providing for more sustainable farming, efficient water management, responsible packaging, reforestation and reduced food waste "in the face of increasing uncertainties and multiple crises," Qu said.

Unless we improve the food system now, the specter of world hunger will loom darker.