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Farmer empowerment: Central in rebuilding agriculture



Dr. Rene E. Ofreneo

LABOREM EXERCENS

In his SONA and post-SONA speeches, President Bongbong Marcos has noticeably taken a more proactive posture on how to rebuild a broken agricultural sector. His marching order to his DA subalterns—"consolidation, modernization, mechanization and improvement of value chains." Boosting agricultural production through the foregoing interrelated programs is "augmented by timely and calibrated importation, as needed," added the President. In short, the overall agricultural revival formula is higher production at home balanced by importation of needed commodities that are in short supply in the market.

In line with the above policy framework, Malacañang has issued the following commands: intensified distribution of rice seeds and agricultural machinery, construction of 600 kilometers of farm-to-market roads, coverage of more farms under the expanded irrigation program, establishment of cold storage facilities and Kadiwa stores nationwide, and procurement and distribution of hosts of planting materials, animal stock and agricultural equipment. These measures are supplemented by memorandum orders allowing the importation by the private sector of agricultural products such as rice, sugar, garlic, salt and onions.

Malacañang also tried to sit down with select farmer leaders and CSO representatives on how to stop smuggling and hoarding. Per hear-

ings by the legislature, the modus operandi of the agricultural trade cartels boils down to the following: buying cheap from the farmers during harvest time, storing these products in their cold storage facilities, controlling the supply further by controlling the importation of these products, and releasing these commodities in the domestic market during the lean seasons at cartel-dictated prices.

To complete the picture on its seemingly newfound agricultural policy activism, Malacañang made a dramatic announcement on the debt of agrarian reform beneficiaries. Around 600,000 ARBs are supposed to be liberated from P60 billion worth of debt, a major hurdle in the efforts of these farmers to secure land titles and make the land

Making the farmers committed to the task of agricultural revival goes beyond the mechanical distribution of seeds, machinery and other inputs. First, there should be assurance that efforts to increase productivity will be amply rewarded, meaning they shall get decent price for their harvest or incomes from all their hard labor in the field.

more productive.

Now, given the foregoing, will the country finally see a rebirth of the agricultural sector? Will the government be able to spur the sector to produce more and feed the nation? Will the government be able to stop the nation's dependence on food importations, which have been growing massively since 1995, the year the Philippines joined the WTO and the year it also became a "net-agricultural importing country"?

The answer, unfortunately, is still a big NO. There are missing elements in the government's envisioned agricultural revival program.

Foremost among these is the missing farmer empowerment program. Dr. Ted Mendoza, one of the country's leading agronomists and scientists explained that the government's agricultural revival program will not take off if the farmers are not buying into the program. This is similar to what is happening in a number of modernizing industrial enterprises. A modern factory will not flourish if its workers are un-



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derpaid, poorly motivated and ill prepared for the tasks of managing new machines and equipment. In short, both a modernized agricultural sector and an upgraded industrial sector require workers who are fully engaged in making modernization work.

Making the farmers committed to the task of agricultural revival goes beyond the mechanical distribution of seeds, machinery and other inputs. First, there should be assurance that efforts to increase productivity will be amply rewarded, meaning they shall get decent price for their harvest or incomes from all their hard labor in the field. Under the Rice Tariffication Law, this is not happening as reflected in the widespread complaints of rice farmers that their incomes have gone down continuously since 2019 as the RTL gifted the big traders-importers-cartelists the license to control the market.

Ironically, even the government is now hurting from the RTL. This ill-advised law disarmed the government's capacity to engage in government-to-government rice importation agreements, build up a buffer stock of rice good for 100 days, intervene in the market to stabilize the price of rice and palay at reasonable rates, and conduct regulatory inspections of the warehouses of suspected hoarders. These functions are normally undertaken by the governments of India, Thailand and Vietnam, the country's major sources of rice imports. With the

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global rice crisis on the horizon, it is time for the Philippines to repeal the RTL and establish a stronger food stabilization agency similar to what these rice-exporting countries and what the EU (through its Common Agricultural Policy) and the United States (through its Farm Bill) have. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. should be reminded that the Masagana 99 program of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. took off in the mid-1970s partly due to the establishment of a well-funded National Food Authority employing

over 10,000 workers.

Another important empowerment measure is the skilling-reskilling of farmers. The Local Autonomy Law devolved extension services to the LGUs, most of which were not prepared to assume the task of mobilizing farmers in support of agricultural modernization. The success of agriculture in the developed countries is partly due to their investments on human resources development. This means education and training-skilling, including sharing of R&D findings and agricultural knowhow, for the benefit of the farmers.

The limited gains of the country

in its implementation of the 13-year-old organic farming law is an example of failure of extension work. This is reflected in the absence of a good transitioning program, which the farmers can use as a guide in moving out of chemical-based agriculture towards an organic farming system without incurring losses in productivity. Going organic (but scientific) requires sound counseling and extension services provided by the DA and cooperating LGUs.

As to agrarian reform, the debt condonation program of PBBM for the estimated 600,000 ARBs should be treated as part of a bigger agrarian reform renewal program. As it

is, agrarian reform, now on its 7th decade (from the tenancy reform under Dadong Macapagal and PD 27 under Marcos Sr. to the CARP of Cory Aquino and new Emancipation Act under Bongbong Marcos), is a big bundle of confusing rules and continuing conflicts. There is no reliable record of how the country has progressed under the program since the 1960s or 1970s. What is clear is that many ARBs in the past (2nd, 3rd and 4th generations) have already sold or pawned their lands. It is also not clear whether the unpaid ARB loans accumulated by the Land Bank are those of the original ARBs or the new landowners who "bought"

the lands from the original ARBs.

At any rate, agrarian reform is a big unfinished task. As envisioned by the Constitution and the CARP law, agrarian reform is supposed to have three major development outcomes: a new class of "emancipated" landless farmers, balanced development of progressive farming communities, and a base for agro-industrial development. Outcome Number One (land distribution) is still a work in progress, while there is no proof that the country is making headway in achieving Outcomes Two and Three. Some studies show that many ARBs have remained poor, with their economic situation

only slightly better than the other rural poor.

Meantime, more and more agricultural lands in the country are being converted into subdivisions and numerous non-agricultural uses. Even big solar companies are using some productive agricultural farms into giant solar plantations. All these are being facilitated by the absence of a democratic "National Land Use" program, which should enable the sitting government the power to stop the continuous shrinking of the country's agricultural sector.

Sa maikling salita, marami pa pong dapat gawin sa agrikultura, Pangulong BBM.



The State of the Nation Address (SONA) message of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. on July 24 was very revealing of his style of leadership and perhaps what we can expect from him in the future.

The President’s SONA was very clinical and reportorial — crammed with facts, figures, and lists of programs. It was dramatically different from what we got from former President Rodrigo Duterte who peppered his speeches with cuss words and lambasted his enemies. Former President Duterte could ramble on and on, from promising the death and destruction of drug lords to condemning the depredations of alleged oligarchs.

What came to mind about President Marcos Jr. after the SONA was the American press’ description of the cerebral and unflappable former US President Barack Obama, “No drama, Obama.”

The SONA indeed was chill, not meant to bring offense to anyone. One could say it had a “friends to all and enemy to none” theme. Even on the controversial Military Pension Reform, he assured there would be no ill effects on the military personnel. “We are inclusive in our pursuit of social protection. The pension of the military and the uniformed personnel is as important, as urgent, and as humanitarian as that of all other civilian Filipino employees. Efforts are underway to make it fully functional and financially sustainable. We are once again working closely with Congress to ease the transition from the old system to the new one, to be able to guarantee that no effects are felt by those in the uniformed services.”

Come to think of it, this “friends to all and enemy to none” mindset can be traced as far back as candidate Bongbong Marcos’ campaign. His campaign theme was “Unity.” He refrained from attacking his political opposition, saying a nary bad word about Leni Robredo. You didn’t hear any red tagging from him, as you would have from his vice-presidential teammate. He relied on nostalgia and a recognizable brand name to move his campaign. In Pinoy lingo, he was “chill lang.”

Perhaps, President Marcos Jr. is trying hard to prove what he’s not. While he tries to evoke nostalgia or recycles some of his father’s programs like the Kadiwa stores and Masagana 99,

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he’s certainly not his father in some ways.

For example, before the election, I heard it said that “he will be a dictator like his father.” The very first thing he would do is declare martial law and jail the opposition, said the critics. Of course, these critics were exaggerating but the consensus, not the confrontational or bullying, style seems more suited to Marcos fil.

I’m wondering, however, whether this friend to all, enemy-to-none strategy can work, especially on difficult issues like food liberalization. We are facing a possible perfect storm of food crises: India has banned exports of non-Basmati rice, driving rice prices higher; Russia has rescinded the grain deal allowing Ukraine to ship out wheat, increasing speculation on wheat

prices; and El Niño, or the unusually dry spell phenomenon, which is expected later this year and could negatively affect food production.

For sure, we must import more food. Not just rice, but also corn, which had also increased in price as corn is a substitute for wheat. Increased corn prices will mean higher prices for livestock since corn accounts for as much as 60% of the cost of livestock.

Allowing more food imports to quell possible rising food inflation will be a politically sensitive issue. The protectionist farmer groups will make noise. President Bongbong Marcos is unlike former President Rodrigo Duterte who could not care less when farmer groups protested the Rice Tarification Law. And unlike former President Duterte, who was the former City Mayor of Davao who had no farmers among his constituents, President Marcos Jr. was a former Ilocos Norte Governor who is aware of the plight of farmers.

Tackling the food issue will test President Marcos Jr.’s political skills. There’s also no way forward in increasing agricultural production but by allowing more land consolidation. It’s fine to talk about farm consolidation through cooperatives but cooperatives don’t work in the Philippines. The only possible solution is to promote bigger and better-managed farms.

Again, this is a politically sensitive issue because the small, marginalized farmer has been romanticized in Philippine political culture. How President Marcos Jr. modernizes Philippine agriculture without being criticized for displacing the poor Filipino farmer will test his political skills. If he does not move toward greater farm consolidation, by ownership or leasing, Philippine agriculture will remain stagnant, and the economy will likely be weighed down by high food prices.

Another example of how President Marcos Jr.’s political

skills will be tested is the issue of the flooding of the North Luzon Expressway. The only long-term solution, according to the President himself, is to build a catchment basin in the Candaba area. But this is being opposed by politicians and farmers in the area. Can he craft a win-win solution and get the catchment basin done? Contrast this with former President Duterte who had a damn-the-torpedoes approach to rehabilitating Boracay.

President Marcos Jr.’s slow, consensus style, however, doesn’t mean he’s afraid to make strong political decisions. Charging Negros Oriental Congressman Arnie Teves, the suspected mastermind and ringleader behind the assassination of Negros Governor Roel Degamo, with terrorism is indicative of a strong state determined to squash warlordism and uphold the rule of law.

I also suspect that President Marcos Jr. sometimes takes extra steps not to appear to be like his



No drama



PHILIPPINE STAR/KJ ROSALES

father, at least when the issue of cronyism is raised. Cronyism is what his critics during the election said he would practice, but the first thing he did when he assumed office was to veto the bill creating the Bulacan Airport Economic Zone.

It was also expected that the Marcos Jr. administration would favor the unsolicited proposal of the Manila International Airport Consortium (MIAC), which consisted of the country's big business groups in rehabilitating the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). The MIAC had a tempting offer of P267 billion at a concession period of 25 years. Many of the members of the MIAC were also members of the Presidential Advisory Council, so it was assumed that the unsolicited proposal was a slam dunk.

However, lo and behold, the government said it would go for a solicited proposal for 15 years, but extendible for another 10 years. It was a good signal since a solicited proposal would mean it would have to go through competitive bidding.

In appointing the new Governor of the Central Bank, President Marcos Jr. didn't choose a politically connected banker, but instead selected an internationally recognized central banking expert, Eli Remolona. Eli spent 19 years at the Bank of International Settlements and 14 years at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. He has a Ph.D. in economics from Stanford University. He probably doesn't even know President Marcos Jr. personally.

I sometimes yearn for the drama associated with Duterte, his cuss words notwithstanding. There were no boring days during Duterte's presidency and you either loved him or hated him. (I once described him as the "finger in the ass of the oligarchy.") On the other hand, President Bongbong Marcos is indicating that he's bringing a new style to the presidency: less drama, more technocracy, more good vibes. However, the country faces major headwinds: economic growth is decelerating, food inflation shows no sign of abating, and geopoliti-

cal tensions are rising. Can President Marcos Jr. do much-needed structural reforms and remain chill? Let's see. ■

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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Oh, my gulay!

A RECENT survey of the Social Weather Stations showed that more Filipinos experienced involuntary hunger in the second quarter of 2023. The survey was conducted from June 28 to July 1, when food prices were lower than they are now.

Typhoon "Egay," which hit the country in late July, pushed prices of vegetables and other food products as it left extensive damage, initially estimated at P1.53 billion, to agriculture in the Cordillera, Central Luzon, Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Western Visayas and Caraga regions.

These days, the prices of vegetables never fail to shock me when I go to the nearby talipapa or when I order from my suki in the neighborhood. My monthly food budget is no longer enough to support my preference for more vegetables and fruits. Ironically, this started in July, which was celebrated as Nutrition Month.

The National Nutrition Council declared July as Nutrition Month "to raise public awareness about the value of good nutrition" and adopted "Healthy Diet Cawing Affordable for All!" as its theme for the observance.

But no matter how high one's awareness is about the importance of eating nutritious food, it becomes



TEA TIME

TITA C.
VALDERAMA

useless when prices are unaffordable.

Recently, a survey by the Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) showed that high prices of nutritious food are the main reason for the rising cases of malnutrition and stunting among Filipino children. Its Campaign Against Malnutrition and Child Stunting noted that most Filipinos have a high level of awareness of malnutrition and stunting but are unable to access nutritious food due to poverty.

The Department of Agriculture's Bantay Presyo, for instance, shows the price of native pechay on August 17 at a range of P100 to P200 per kilogram, or 100 percent higher than the P50 to P100 per kg on June 30. When you buy it retail, a bundle of three small pieces would cost P20. String beans (sitaw) cost P4 per piece, or P20 for a bundle of five.

I've been avoiding cooking chopsuey, pinakbet, puchero and other dishes with a variety of vegetable ingredients. Sinigang is limited to having just kangkong or kamote tops. No more

radish (labanos), sitaw and okra.

Checking the prices of basic food items makes me wonder how minimum wage earners make both ends meet.

According to the 2021 Expanded National Nutritional Survey, about 2 percent, or 5.3 million Filipinos, experienced severe food insecurity, and 33.4 percent, or 42 million, experienced moderate food insecurity. This translates to about 3 out of 10 households that have experienced moderate to severe food insecurity.

One of the pillars of food security is access, in which the price of food is a factor. It said people may settle for cheaper food that may be lower in nutritional value in the absence of healthy and affordable options.

The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 68.6 percent of Filipinos, or about 75.2 million, cannot afford a healthy diet in 2020. That was three years ago, when food prices increased substantially.

The United Nations' latest State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report showed 50.9 million Filipinos did not have constant access to adequate food in 2022, classifying them as facing moderate to severe food insecurity in 2020 to 2022.

Keeping food prices stable and

at affordable levels is indeed one of the biggest challenges for President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The burden on his shoulders is doubled as he has concurrently assumed the secretaryship of the agriculture department.

Last week, Marcos ordered the Department of Trade and Industry and the DA to closely monitor rice prices following reports that prices of the staple food are hitting as high as P56 per kilogram, way higher than his "aspiration", to bring it down to P20 per kg.

Just less than a month ago, in his second State of the Nation Address (SONA), Marcos claimed that the prices of commodities in the market had significantly reduced. "Sa mga nakalipas na buwan, nakita natin ang pagbaba ng presyo ng bilihin sa iba't ibang mga sektor. Napatunayan natin na kayang maipababa ang presyo ng bigas, karne, isda, gulay at asukal," he said.

The lower prices were available only in the Kadiwa stores, which have limited hours and places of operation. In public markets, prices continue to increase. Supermarkets and grocery stores sell these products at even higher prices.

If you go to the market after listening to Marcos' claim about lower prices, you can't avoid exclaiming, Oh, my gulay!



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DAR chief to panel: Hasten IRR of law condoning farmers' debts

By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

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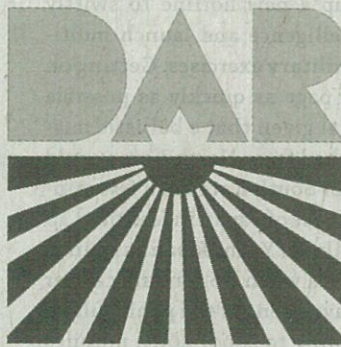
THE Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) has directed the committee tasked with the formulation of the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of Republic Act (RA) 11953, or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, to step up its efforts and make the IRR "inclusive."

DAR Secretary Conrado M. Estrella III wants the members of the committee to "proceed with dispatch" in crafting the IRR but he directed the technical working group to gather inputs from agrarian reform communities.

During the first joint meeting of the committee, Estrella reiterated the need for a comprehensive IRR for the law's smooth implementation and within the 60-day deadline provided for, after its effectivity on July 23, 2023.

He directed the technical working group to conduct public consultations in key agrarian reform communities in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, for their inputs with regard to the IRR.

The condonation of the debt burden of agrarian reform beneficiaries will cost



P57.57 billion and benefit 610,054 agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs), covering 1,173,101.57 hectares of agrarian reform lands.

The government will also shoulder the balance of the obligations of 10,201 ARBS, tilling 11,531.24

hectares of agrarian reform lands, under the voluntary land transfer/direct payment scheme (VLT/DPS), amounting to P206,776.41.

The ARBs covered by RA 11953 will also be included in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSB-SA) of the Department of Agriculture, which will give them access to support services from the agency.

They will be exempted from payment of estate tax.

The law provides for restitution awarded to agrarian reform lands, which were forfeited solely due to non-payment of annual amortizations, and interest will be restored to the original beneficiaries.

The seven-man committee is chaired by DAR Undersecretary for Legal Affairs Napoleon U. Galit while Landbank of the Philippines (LandBank) Executive Vice President Alex Lorayes will serve as vice chairman.

The other members of the committee are DAR Undersecretary Marilyn B. Barua-Yap, NIA Acting Administrator Eduardo G. Guillen, Land Registration Authority Administrator Gerardo P. Sirios, LandBank Vice President Marife O. Pascua, and DAR Undersecretary Luis Meinrado C. Pangulayan.

The committee was created by virtue of a memorandum from the Office of the President issued by Executive Secretary Lucas P. Bersamin, on August 3, and DAR Special Order No. 508, pursuant to Section 12 of RA 11953, on August 7.



Manila must speed up accreditation, purchase of ASF vaccines—lawmaker

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

[@joveemarie](#)

THE Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) must fast-track the accreditation and subsequent purchase of vaccines that have been shown to be effective against African swine fever (ASF), according to a lawmaker.

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Raymund F. Villafuerte Jr. issued the statement over the weekend, following President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s own pitch that an inoculation drive could revitalize the hog industry, whose population has been decimated by this highly contagious viral disease.

"The FDA and BAI need to hit the gas with this vaccination drive to put an end to the wholesale deaths and selective slaughter of hogs, allow swine raisers to recover and repopulate their farms or backyards, and eventually stabilize the supply and cost of pork products in the local market," said Villafuerte.

"The FDA must speed up the registration process for the local commercial use of the Vietnamese-made vaccine, which President Marcos said has been proven 80 percent effective against the ASF; and the BAI, as soon as the drug is accredited by the FDA, has to accelerate its acquisition of the shots and subsequent implementation of the inoculation program nationwide."

Villafuerte said "speed is of the essence" in this mass vaccination plan, given that BAI officials have said that the Vietnamese supplier has committed only 600,000 doses only for the Philippines for this year.

A recent Reuters report said, though, that Vietnam will actually export 2 million vaccine doses to the Philippines this year, but there has been no confirmation from the BAI

on this volume.

Villafuerte reiterated his previous proposals for the government to declare a state of calamity in ASF-struck areas, so it can immediately access calamity or quick response funds for the planned immunization drive; and subsidize 100 percent, or at least 50 percent, of the cost of the shots for backyard raisers, who make up the bulk of local hog growers.

In the absence of funds for the proposed mass vaccination program in the current General Appropriations Act (GAA), he said accessing Malacañang Palace's calamity funds will enable the BAI to procure the vaccine from Vietnam and hopefully kick-off the inoculation drive before the year is over.

To sustain the immunization project into 2024, Villafuerte said a sufficient amount of funds needs to be included in the BAI budget in the proposed 2024 GAA of P5.768 trillion, and both the House of Representatives and the Senate must support this outlay this budget deliberation season.

"The FDA and BAI must work double-time on this program, as the President mentioned in his second SONA that the government is about to acquire an effective vaccine and, in the meantime, has been focused on strengthening bio-security measures to prevent the spread of animal diseases."

The FDA had confirmed that BAI had applied for certification of the Vietnam-made Avac vaccine, and this application will be subjected to pre-assessment.

Earlier, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Rex Estoperez said the DA and the BAI have started talks on potential financial assistance for hog raisers, and the options include realigning the budget from other DA-attached agencies or turning to Congress for an additional allocation.



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PFDA opens processing facility at Navotas fish port

THE Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) inaugurated the new processing facility at the Navotas Fish Port Complex, which will be operated by a women's organization producing smoked fish.

In a statement, the PFDA said that Eco-Friendly Women of Navotas Fish Port, Inc. will run the processing facility.

The PFDA also added 44 food stalls to the freshly renovated Market 3.

"This new infrastructure also aims to provide more employment opportunities and an additional sources of income for the

members of the association," the PFDA said.

The PFDA is also looking into constructing additional regional fish port (RFP) complexes and establishing modern fish trading centers elsewhere in the Philippines.

Six ports are being upgraded in Davao, Iloilo, Zamboanga, Camaligan, Camarines Sur, Sual, Pangasinan, as well as Navotas.

Fish landed at RFPs totaled 42,814.19 metric tons in May, down 4.26% from a month earlier, mainly due to the early onset of the rainy season. — **Sheldeem Joy Talavera**



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Fisherfolk call for support during closed season

Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya), an organization of fisherfolk, said the government's primary policy response to closed fishing seasons should be to support the fishing communities rendered idle, rather than importing fish.

"It seems like the government isn't learning when it comes to solving the production crisis," Pamalakaya Vice Chairman Ronnel Arambulo said in a statement.

"They are aware that the major fishing grounds (observe) a closed fishing season every year, but they don't have any contin-

gency plan (for the fisherfolk)," he added.

Last week, the Department of Agriculture (DA) approved imports of 35,000 metric tons (MT) of fish for wet markets, which are to be brought in between Oct. 1 and Dec. 31.

The species to be imported are frozen round scad or galunggong, bigeye scad or matang baka, bonito, moonfish, and mackerel.

Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources spokesman Nazario C. Briguera told reporters that the imports will cover the expected shortfall caused by the closed season.

In its supply and situation outlook, the BFAR estimated a fish deficit of 57,830 MT by the fourth quarter.

Closed fishing seasons are declared to allow fish to spawn and restore their numbers.

"Prior to the three-month closed fishing season every last quarter of the year, local production should be strengthened by providing support to fishers such as fuel subsidies," Mr. Arambulo said.

He also said that the government should ensure availability of cold storage to ensure the adequate supply of fish during the closed season.

"It is unacceptable that just because there is a temporary ban on catching round scad, it will allow imports," Mr. Arambulo said.

"The government should take the lead in promoting our local fish instead of imports," he added.

As of Thursday, DA price monitors put the price of domestically-caught round scad at between P200 and P280 while imported round scad fetched P200.

The prevailing price of tilapia in Metro Manila markets was P120-P160. Milkfish or bangus sold for P150-P240. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**



R&D to improve quality of mango exports

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE National Sectoral Committee on Fruits and Vegetables has convened mango stakeholders earlier this month to discuss concerns on research and development (R&D) and trade policies.

The Department of Agriculture (DA), through its Policy Research Services (PRS), said this is in preparation for the possible provision of logistics support to mango exporters.

Jerome Bunyi, DA-PRS officer-in-charge director, also recommended that stakeholders discuss the R&D in the production of new mango varieties that would be in demand in the international market.

Bunyi noted the need for R&D to improve the Carabao mango's skin and shelf life to lessen its perishability and costly packaging.

He said while Philippine man-

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R&D

goes are considered among the best in the world, they are one of the cheapest in the international market.

During the same meeting, the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization has urged stakeholders to try its mobile elevating work platform (MEWP) to improve production.

The agency addressed concerns that the MEWP cannot be used in small and hilly mango farms, saying

there are current efforts to localize the equipment for such conditions.

The Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) also presented the enhancements in its Plant Product Safety Services Division (PPSD) capacity for pesticide residue analysis, as stakeholders said they exceed the maximum residue limits (MRL) in importing countries for the detection of banned pesticides and undetected pesticides.

William Mugot, BPI-PPSSD

chief, also urged local mango producers to continue good agricultural practices which, besides overcoming MRL issues, address the quality of the product, its food safety and the preservation of the environment and welfare of farm workers.

Based on a market review by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, the Philippines exported 8,986 tons of mangoes last year.

Meanwhile, Philippine Statistics Authority data showed that 712,553.17 metric tons (MT) of mangoes were produced in the country last year.

Bulk of the volume was Mango Carabao variant at 581,395.45 MT or 81.6 percent, while Mango Piko was at 27,548.16 MT or 3.9 percent and the remaining 103,609.57 MT or 14.5 percent were all other mango varieties.

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Group hits gov't over 35,000 MT fish imports

By MARK ERNEST VILLEZA

The Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya) has expressed strong criticism against the government's intention to import about 35,000 metric tons of fish.

In a statement issued yesterday, the group asserted that the government "seems to be disregarding the resolution of the production crisis."

"They are aware of the closed fishing season in the country's major fisheries every year but no contingency plan is implemented to ensure that the expected fall in fish production does not end up in imports," the fisherfolk group said in Filipino.

The organization has consistently advocated for strengthening local production through measures such as providing support to fishers, including a fuel subsidy, before the three-month closed fishing season.

Pamalakaya also emphasized the necessity of having post-harvest facilities like cold storage to ensure the preservation of fish and would guarantee sufficient supply in the months following the closed fishing season.

"We once again remind President Marcos, who is also the secretary of

the Department of Agriculture, that importation is dangerous to the livelihood of fishermen," it said.

Past reliance on imports has significantly decreased the value of catch from small-scale fisherfolk, particularly galunggong (round scad).

In some areas such as Palawan, the farm gate price of *galunggong* dropped from P80-P100 per kilo to P50-P60 per kilo due to the influx of cheaper imported fish, Pamalakaya said.

The group emphasized that the current import plan is unacceptable, especially as there is a temporary ban on catching round scad.

It said the Philippines' waters are abundant with various fish species, offering alternatives that are both affordable and rich in protein.

Every year, a three-month closed fishing season is implemented for *galunggong* from November to February in major fishing grounds like the Visayan Sea, Bicol region, Batangas and Palawan.

The government eyes to import 35,000 metric tons of pelagic fishes, including *galunggong*, *matang baka* (bigeye scad), bonito, moonfish and mackerel for wet markets from Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 2023.

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Rice sold at P38/kilo at Kadiwa stores

A rice traders' group will sell rice at P38 per kilo in Kadiwa stores amid the upward trend in the retail price of rice.

"We are coordinating with the (Department of Agriculture) regarding this (sale of P38 per kilo of rice in Kadiwa) since we need proper coordination, but we never stopped in our efforts to sell P38 per kilo in certain areas in Metro Manila," Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement lead convenor Rowena Sadicon said in a radio interview yesterday.

"The increase in the retail price of rice is because of the export ban of India. This is an outside factor that we cannot really control," she added,

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Rice From Page 1

denying that the spike in the retail price of rice was caused by hoarding and price manipulation.

Sadicon noted that rice traders are providing subsidies to ensure they can maintain selling rice at P38.

The retail price of rice will go down once the peak of the palay harvest begins, she added.

"By late September, October, the local harvest will come in and that's the time the retail prices will start to go down," Sadicon said.

Meanwhile, at least P22 billion was collected from the Rice Tarification Law in 2022, according to farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag).

"The P10 billion will go automatic to various government agencies, including P5 billion for Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization; Philippine Rice Research Institute, P3 billion; P1 billion to Land Bank of the Philippines; Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, P1 billion. The extra P12 billion will be distributed to farmers owning less than two hectares of land," said Sinag chairman Rosendo So.

Farmers are entitled to P5,000 cash assistance under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund, So noted.

"We are asking the DA to give the money to our farmers now so that they can use it," he said.

- Bella Cariaso



RICE IMPORTS BUCKED

THE head of farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG), Rosendo So, is calling for the abolition of the National Food Authority (NFA) over what he said was the agency's preference to import rice rather than buy from Filipino farmers.

In a statement, So said the latest showcase of the NFA's skewed preference for imported rice was the ongoing negotiations with India for rice procurement.

"They're not buying from our farmers anymore. They're buying from Vietnam, India. They're negotiating on rice. What's this!" So lamented.

The SINAG chair also expressed fear that funds for buying local produce might be diverted to the procurement of rice from India.

"The NFA power is to buy palay isn't it?" said So. "What are they doing negotiating with India to buy rice?"

"They might use the money allocated to buy domestically produced palay to acquire imported rice again," So added, referring to the agency's P8.5 billion available funds for procurement of rice.

Also, the NFA's tack seems to be contrary to the policy of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. who wants to ramp up domestic production in agriculture.

"For the past administration, the direction was to import," So said.

"In President Marcos Jr.'s administration, he wants local production, so a lot of Filipino farmers were encouraged to return to farming but then again the NFA's policy seems contrary to this," So said.

If the NFA will not help the country's grain and farming industry by buying domestically produced rice then the agency should be abolished, he added.

"Since they are running contrary to the President, the NFA is not helping by buying 'palay,' then we should just abolish the NFA," So lamented.

The SINAG chair also questioned the NFA's decision to source Philippine rice stocks from abroad when it could buy rice at a much lower rate in the country's other agricultural regions.

He cited Philippine Statistic Authority (PSA) data showing average buying rates for a kilogram of domestically produced

palay was between PHP18.50 to PHP19.

The NFA can always look for prices lower than these in other regions, according to So.

"Buying rates in other areas are lower, so they should have bought there, right? They should have bought there already," So said.

"If you are comparing price ranges, especially in Nueva Ecija, prices there are really high. But if you will check on Mindoro and other areas, prices there are lower," he said.

So also scored the NFA for justifying importation by announcing it has only 46,000 metric tons of rice left in its inventory, which is good for just 1.3 days.

But this is the fault of the NFA, So said, since it has not been buying locally-produced rice to add to its stock.

"That is their fault, why did they not buy more palay in the first place? That is their mandate, which is to buy locally produced palay," said So.

He recalled the NFA saying at a congressional hearing that it still has P8.5 billion left for rice procurement, which was enough to buy palay at P19 per

kilo.

So said the amount of palay that can be bought with P8.5 billion translates into 290,789 metric tons of rice which is more than enough to boost the country's buffer stock.

The Philippines' daily consumption rate of rice is 35,000 metric tons.

"The NFA should have sufficient buffer stock if they bought 'palay' ahead of time, the problem is they did not buy any," So said.

"The question is why are the NFA (officials) in India when they are not allowed to import," So said, referring to the provisions of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) or Republic Act 11203 prohibiting NFA from importing rice.

Aside from Bioco, the DA has confirmed that Assistant Agriculture Secretary for Operations Arnel de Mesa is also part of the delegation in India.

SINAG had sued former NFA administrator Jason Aquino and accounting services department manager Gerry Ambrocio for technical malversation and graft at the Ombudsman over the use of P5.1 billion in NFA funds.



Mga baboy sa Palawan, misteryosong namamatay

INIIMBESTIGAHAN na ng disease surveillance team ng provincial veterinary office (PVO) ng Palawan ang misteryosong pagkamatay ng mga baboy sa dalawang bayan sa nasabing lalawigan.

Sinabi ni PVO officer-in-charge Dr. Darius Mangcucang na ipinadala ang grupo sa mga barangay ng Cocoro at Balaguen sa mga bayan ng Magsaysay at Coron para kumolekta ng sample ng dugo na ipadadala sa Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) para matukoy kung nakapasok na sa Palawan ang Asian

swine fever (ASF).

Dahil dito, 'isolated' na ang Cocoro Island hanggang hindi pa nakukumpirma kung anong sakit ang nakapasok dito bukod pa sa bawal na rin ang pagbiyahe sa mga buhay na baboy at pork products mula sa mga kalapit na munisipalidad patungo sa Cuyo at Magsaysay.

Malapit ang Cuyo at Magsaysay sa Panay Islands sa Western Visayas kung saan maraming mga lugar ang apektado na rin ng ASF.

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'Key investments, sustained growth to improve incomes'

By CAI U. ORDINARIO [@caiordinario](#)

THE Philippines must make the difficult choices and put in the work now to grow the economy by as much as 8 percent annually in two decades to significantly improve the income of Filipinos, according to the country's Socioeconomic Planning Secretary.



In a recent University of the Philippines Alumni Council Meeting, National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said the economy must grow 6.5 percent to 8 percent annually for the next 20 years to make the economy less inequitable.

Balisacan said this goal should be

driven by significant investments in infrastructure and emerging industries in the medium term. Significant investments would help sectors such as agribusiness, mining, tourism, manufacturing, education, creatives, health, and IT-BPM to drive the economy and create jobs.

"We should have made such in-

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BALISACAN

vestments decades ago. While we are certainly feeling the effects of our neglect, there is no other choice but to make the difficult choices and put in the work now," Balisacan said.

"We must take two (even three) steps forward, even as other forces—populism and political expediency—take us one step backward," he stressed.

Balisacan said this urgency underpins the Marcos Jr. administration's investment in its infrastructure flagship program. The program, which covers 194 big-

ticket projects, amounts to about P8.3 trillion.

The projects, he said, seek to support physical connectivity to enable access to economic opportunities, water resources to support the growing needs of the population and industry, as well as improve adaptation to climate risks; and agriculture as the cornerstone of our country's food security.

Balisacan said the administration will strive to complete as many IFPs during the President's term. The Neda was designated by Marcos Jr. to "monitor the progress of these projects and ensure that agencies are accountable for the delays in project delivery."

Human capital

MEANWHILE, the administration is also making investments that seek to improve human capital by increasing Filipinos' "income-earning ability."

This means making investments to improve education and promote lifelong learning; boost health; and ensure food security and proper nutrition. These have been identified in the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023-2028.

SEE "KEY," A2

Key...CONTINUED FROM A12

In terms of education, Balisacan said, effort must be exerted in recovering learning losses. He noted that Filipino "children consistently lag in the most fundamental cognitive tasks."

Based on data from the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in 2022, the learning poverty in the Philippines is 90.9 percent. Learning poverty refers to the proportion of 10-year-old children in and out of school who cannot read a simple text.

The same data also showed learning deprivation in the country was at 90.4 percent. This refers to the share of children in school who have below minimum proficiency in reading.

Further, schooling deprivation in the Philippines was at 5 percent. This data refers to the share of primary age children who are out of school.

"The prospect of witnessing the effects of our educational deficits later on—when the children enter the labor force and labor-saving technologies such as artificial intelligence may have evolved in ways we have not yet even imagined—is quite disturbing," Balisacan said.

In order to address this, programs and projects that align and match the needs of the private sector and industry with skills and competencies being developed in educational institutions are vital.

These institutions include basic education as well as technical, and vocational educational training (TVET) and higher education in institutions such as UP, the country's national university.

"Our education sector must be able to develop processes and spearhead initiatives that will allow our citizens to quickly adapt and respond to emerging trends in the labor market," Balisacan said.

"We must address learning losses and improve global competitiveness, as we must not stay caught up and remain insulated from the rest of the world," he added.

In terms of health, Balisacan said the pandemic highlighted the need to "equitably distribute health infrastructure and human resources and promote health-seeking behavior and health literacy."

Balisacan said there is a need for efforts to enhance the government's capacities for public health emergencies both at the national and local levels.

Another important consideration in health is food security. Balisacan said better nutrition outcomes should be the "broader objective" of food security.

There is a need, he said, to expand "consumers' access to affordable, safe, and nutritious food through investments in our food systems, including agricultural production, transport, and logistics."



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Gov't urged to pair lower agri tariffs with measures boosting domestic output

THE government's tariff-lowering on agricultural commodities must be accompanied by measures boosting domestic production, analysts said.

"It is crucial that for this policy to work that programs intended to increase productivity be initiated at the same time to support producers who may be adversely affected," Ateneo de Manila economics professor Leonardo A. Lanzona told *BusinessWorld* in an e-mail.

Mr. Lanzona said that a comprehensive industrial policy should ensure "greater utilization of domestic resources," alongside reforms that

will support the short-term needs of domestic producers.

"I am in favor of removing all forms of tariff that limit the entry of basic commodities to consumers and provide protection to selected group of industries," he said.

"However, while this policy may benefit consumers, this can prove detrimental to firms and

other producers, making this policy unsustainable," he added.

Industrial policy should promote expanded exports, which will generate resources to import goods that the Philippines cannot produce efficiently, he said. —
Sheldeen Joy Talavera

FULL STORY



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BSP rate hike cycle over for now — analysts

DESPITE upside risks to inflation remaining, some analysts are betting that the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas' (BSP) rate hike phase has concluded for now, citing expectations of inflation decreasing to the target range by the fourth quarter.

"We do not see the BSP hiking anymore this cycle, despite upside risks to inflation," China Banking Corp. chief economist Domini Velasquez said.

"We think inflation in the next two months will likely be more elevated than previously anticipated, but we also see inflation still coming down to the BSP's target by November," she added.

For a third consecutive meeting, monetary authorities in August opted to keep the policy rate unchanged at 6.25 percent, noting that the latest fundamental forecasts indicate a reversion to the inflation target in the fourth quarter of 2023.

In March, the BSP had raised its benchmark interest rate by a modest 25 basis points, resulting in a cumulative 425-basis-points increase since May of the previous year — the highest level of increase in almost 16 years.

The consistent easing of inflation in recent months, however, has given the central bank a reason

► Hike B2

to pause hiking interest rates so that it can evaluate any potential emerging threats to the inflation projection.

After hitting an unexpected 14-year peak of 8.7 percent in January, inflation notably slowed to 4.7 percent in July, although this was still above the central bank's targeted range of 2.0 to 4.0 percent for that period.

Despite the apparent easing in inflation, the Monetary Board has revised up its 2023 inflation projection to 5.6 percent from the initial 5.5 percent. The forecasts for the following year and for 2025 have also been revised up to 3.3 percent and 3.4 percent, from the original figures of 2.8 percent and 3.2 percent, respectively.

Velasquez pointed out that the elevated trajectory of inflation was primarily a result of the recent surge in global oil prices.

"The BSP continues to see inflation risks tilted to the upside," she said.

Potential risks include limitations in the supply of essential food products, potential increases in transportation fares, minimum wage adjustments surpassing expectations, and the influence of El Niño conditions on food costs and electricity charges, Velasquez explained.

For his part, Emilio Neri, a senior economist at the Bank of the Philippine Islands, pointed out the possibility of another surge in food prices — especially rice — if the impact of El Niño turns out to be more severe than initially anticipated.

"Concerns about the commodity have intensified recently due to a potential shortage in the coming months. Importation is usually the immediate solution of the country when there is a supply problem,

but this could become difficult since El Niño is expected to affect other countries as well," Neri said.

"This is a significant upside risk to inflation since rice accounts for almost 9 percent of the inflation basket," Neri said, adding that inflation usually breaches the BSP target range when there is a surge in rice prices.

However, Neri qualified that if significant supply disruptions do not occur, inflation could potentially align with the BSP's target as early as October this year.

"The year-on-year decline in global oil prices should continue to pull down the headline price and reduce the price pressure on other commodities," Neri said.

"We maintain our view that rate cuts are premature at this point even if gross domestic growth has slowed down," he added.

NIÑA MYKA PAULINE ARCEC



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INFLATION PROJECTIONS AT RISK

FOOD PRICE HIKES FEARED AS EL NIÑO STRENGTHENS

Food prices may further increase in the coming months as climate experts see greater chances that the El Niño weather phenomenon will eventually become a “strong” occurrence based on indicators observed over the past months.

When this happens, agricultural production will likely be reduced due to unfavorable weather characterized by an extended dry period. Food prices will consequently increase thus affecting inflation projections.

In their latest monthly bulletin, the US Climate Prediction Center (CPC) said the climate phenomenon had a 95 percent chance of continuing through the northern hemisphere winter or December to February.

The CPC said observations made in July showed that El Niño continued as indicated by above-average sea surface temperatures across the equa-

torial Pacific Ocean.

Tropical atmospheric anomalies were also consistent with an occurrence of El Niño, with low-level winds “anomalously” blowing toward the central equatorial region of the Pacific—going west from the eastern side of the ocean and going east from the western side.

“Given recent developments, forecasters are more confident in a ‘strong’ El Niño event, with roughly two in three odds of an event reaching or exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius (above normal) for the November-January seasonal average,” the CPC said.

Last week, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) Governor Eli Remolona Jr. cited the possible impact of El Niño as one of the factors that could result in inflation readings exceeding forecasts.

The BSP forecasts that

while the monthly print has been going down since 8.7 percent in January, inflation at 4.7 percent in July was still high.

Moreover, monetary authorities expressed concern that upside risks such as El Niño were pushing up prices of food.

And while forecasts also see inflation in a path that would put the readout further lower and within the government’s target band of 2 to 4 percent, Remolona said on Friday that the BSP was ready to resume policy rate increases, if such upside risks materialize.

Fitch Solutions Group subsidiary BMI said earlier that based on five occurrences of “severe” El Niño since the 1990s, rice production in the Philippines was one of the worst-hit in Asia whenever the climate phenomenon hits overdrive.

—RONNEL W. DOMINGO INQ



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Diokno hinarang sa imported sugar

Tinutulan ng mga kongresista ang panukala na luwagan ang pag-angat ng asukal sa bansa dahil sa negatibo umanong epekto nito sa lokal na industriya ng asukal.

Ilang mambabatas ang naghain ng House Resolution No. 1199 upang tutulan ang panukala ni Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno.

Ayon sa resolusyon, sinabi umano ni Diokno na ang pagluluwag sa importasyon ng asukal ay bahagi ng panukala na itaas ang buwis na ipinapataw sa naturang produkto.

Sa ilalim ng Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law, pinapatawan ng P6 kada litro ang sweetened beverage na ginagamitan ng purely caloric at non-caloric sweetener o kombinasyon nito, at P12 buwis naman sa bawat litro ng sweetened beverage na ginagamitan ng high fructose corn syrup.

Bahagi ng kita sa TRAIN Law ay dapat gamitin sa pagpapalakas ng industriya ng asukal sa bansa.

Pero ayon sa mga may-akda ng resolusyon, mula 2018 hanggang 2023 ay P3.92 bilyon lamang ang inilaan sa Sugarcane Industry Development Act (SIDA) kahit na 52% ng kabuuang P336.1 bilyon ng excise tax ay nakolekta sa sweetened beverage.

"Instead of remedying this injustice, the DOF proposes to liberalize sugar importation that will further compound the ills of the domestic sugar industry," sabi sa resolusyon.
(Billy Begas)



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US agriculture delegation visiting Davao in Sept.

DAVAO CITY — Eight US agricultural companies will visit Davao in September, US Ambassador to the Philippines MaryKay Carlson said on Friday.

Ms. Carlson said the delegation is seeking investment and trade opportunities in the region, which is a major producer of Philippine agricultural exports.

"Agriculture is the strength of this region. A trade mission is coming next month, big firms like John Deere. I go back to ag-

riculture because you have such a great advantage here when it comes to agriculture and I know that you gain a lot of foreign exchange from export of agricultural products," she told BusinessWorld at the Park Inn by Radisson Davao.

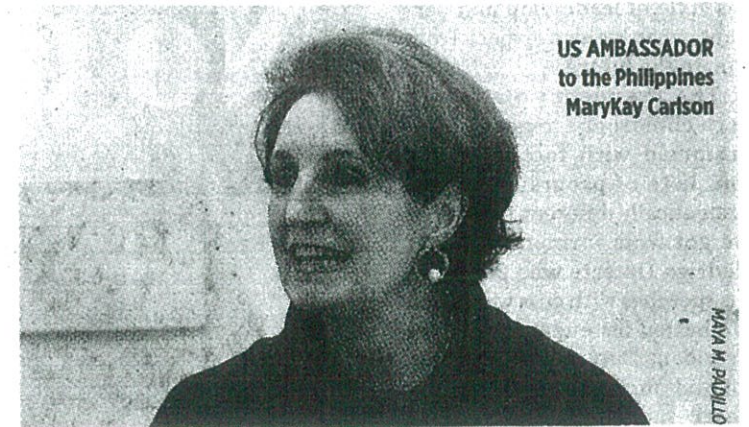
"The US is the largest export market for the Philippines. Of the services and products you are sending overseas, the greatest destination is in the US," she added.

Beyond trade and investment, Ms. Carlson said the US sees opportunities to work with the Philippines through its foreign aid organization.

"In some areas, we hear President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. speaks often about the importance of food security and nutrition security. I think there is a lot that we can do in this area through USAID (the US Agency for International Development)."

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. met with US businesses in Washington, DC, during his four-day visit to the US in May.

Ms. Carlson cited the strong people-to-people ties with the Philippines as the basis for building the relationship further, noting the large numbers of Filipino students in the US, the significant Filipino-American population, and the 350,000 Americans living in the Philippines. — **Maya M. Padillo**



US AMBASSADOR
to the Philippines
MaryKay Carlson

MAYA M. PADILLO



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India faces record low rains in August, posing threat to summer crops

MUMBAI — India is heading for its driest August in more than a century, with scant rainfall likely to persist across large areas, partly because of the El Niño weather pattern, two weather department officials told Reuters on Friday.

August rainfall, expected to be the lowest since records began in 1901, could dent yields of summer-sown crops, from rice to soybeans, boosting prices and overall food inflation, which jumped in July to the highest since January 2020.

The monsoon, vital for the \$3-trillion economy, delivers nearly 70% of the rain India needs to water farms and refill reservoirs and aquifers.

"The monsoon is not reviving as we had expected," said a senior official of the India Meteorological Department (IMD), who sought anonymity as the matter is a sensitive one.

"We are going to end the month with a significant deficit in the southern, western, and central parts."

India is on course to receive an average of less than 180 mm (7 inches) of rainfall this month, he added, based on rains so far and expectations for the rest of the month.

The weather authorities are expected to announce August totals of rainfall and the forecast for September on Aug. 31 or Sept. 1.

India received just 90.7 mm (3.6 inches) in the first 17 days of August, nearly 40% lower than normal. The month's normal average is 254.9 mm (10 inches), he said.

Earlier, the IMD had anticipated a rainfall deficit of up to 8% in August. The lowest August rainfall on record was in 2005, with 191.2 mm (7.5 inches).

Monsoon rainfall is expected to improve over the next two weeks in the northeast and some central regions, but dry conditions in northwestern and southern states are likely to persist, said another IMD official.

"Normally, we experience a dry spell of five to seven days in August,"

said the official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity. "However, this year the dry spell has been unusually prolonged in southern India. The El Niño weather pattern has begun to impact the Indian monsoon."

El Niño, a warming of waters that usually stifles rainfall over the Indian subcontinent, has emerged in the tropical Pacific for the first time in seven years. This monsoon has been uneven, with June rains 10% below average but July rains rebounding to 13% above average.

Summer rains are crucial as nearly half of India's farmland lacks irrigation. Farmers typically start planting rice, corn, cotton, soybeans, sugarcane and peanuts, among other crops, from June 1, when the monsoon begins to lash the southern state of Kerala.

The lengthy dry spell has led to extremely low soil moisture, which could inhibit growth of crops, said Harish Galipelli, director of trading firm ILA Commodities India Pvt Ltd. — **Reuters**



India faces record low August rains, threatening summer crops

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A farmer removing dried plants from his parched paddy field on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. (Reuters Photo)