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MARCOS BAGS \$4.26B DEALS IN SAUDI ARABIA

RIYADH: The Philippines has secured about \$4.26 billion worth of investments during President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s visit to Saudi Arabia.

Four agreements between Saudi firms and Filipino companies were

signed during Marcos' roundtable meeting with Saudi business leaders on Thursday in Riyadh.

The biggest of the four is the \$3.7 billion deal between Al-Jeer Human Resources Co. (ARCO) and Association of Philippine

Licensed Agencies for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to provide jobs for Filipinos in the kingdom, according to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

The agreement is expected to create more than 200,000 jobs to drive Saudi

Arabia's Vision 2030.

Also signed was the agreement between Al Rushaid Petroleum Investment Co. and Samsung Engineering NEC Co. Ltd., and the Filipino firm EEI Corp. to set up a

►DealsA2

training facility in Tanza, Cavite, worth \$120 million.

Offering courses in masonry, carpentry, electrical, welding, equipment management, warehousing, steel fabrication, and other construction-related crafts, the deal aims to train at least 2,000 Filipinos starting in 2024 and more than 15,000 in the next five years.

Two separate agreements between Maharah Human Resources Co. of Saudi and Filipino firms Staffhouse International Resources Corp., and E-GMP International Corp. were each valued at an estimated \$191 million.

Both pacts seek to send 10,000 Filipino workers annually to the kingdom until 2030.

In his speech during the roundtable, the President also announced that \$120 million worth of deals will be signed between the Philippines and Saudi Arabia. He did not elaborate.

"With an estimated value of over \$120 million, the agreements that will be signed today are set to benefit more than 15,000 Filipinos



THE PRINCE AND THE PRESIDENT The Crown Prince of Kuwait, Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (center), meets President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at the sidelines of the 1st Asean-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), on Friday, Oct. 20, 2023, to discuss labor relations between the two countries. PHOTO BY PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

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nos in training and employment opportunities across a wide range of professions in the construction industry," Marcos said.

He said his meeting with top Saudi business leaders comes at a time when the Philippine economy "continues its high growth trajectory," citing the 7.6 percent gross domestic product in 2022, which is deemed "the fastest rate of growth recorded by the Philippines since 1976."

The President also noted that foreign direct investments (FDIs) reached \$9.2 billion last year.

The financial and banking sectors are "healthy and robust," he said, and the country's credit rating continues to receive "stable and positive" investment grades.

"I assure you that the Philippine government is steadfast in its commitment to continuously support current and prospective Saudi investors," he said.

Marcos said he is looking forward to building "greater and closer" partnerships with Saudi Arabia, which has "the largest population of overseas Filipinos in the world."

Saudi Arabia hosts about 1 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), as well as the largest community of Filipino professionals in such industries as engineering, architecture and health care.

The President said the Foreign Investments Act, the Retail Trade Liberalization Act, the Public Services Act, and the Renewable Energy Act aim to attract foreign investors in telecommunications, port operations, transportation, and clean energy, among others.

He said the Corporate Recovery

and Tax Incentives for Enterprises Act enables foreign investors to enjoy fiscal incentives.

The President also hoped that the Philippines and Saudi Arabia would strengthen their ties not just in trade but also in other sectors, such as telecommunications, health care, energy and agriculture.

"We should not limit ourselves alone to the labor market. We should also explore the new businesses that have come up since the end of the pandemic economy," he said.

In his presentation during the roundtable, Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno said that among the Marcos administration's thrust is to attract direct equity investment from local and global funds, carry out co-financing and knowledge-sharing with other sovereign wealth funds, accelerate the implementation of the 197 infrastructure flagship projects, and invest in emerging megatrends such as digitalization, ESG and health care.

The infrastructure flagship projects worth around \$153 billion involve water resources, \$14.6 billion; digital connectivity, \$1.7 billion; agriculture, \$11.2 billion; physical connectivity, \$122.5 billion; health, \$2.3 billion; power and energy, \$180 million; and other infrastructures, \$750 million.

Diokno said the appropriate and realistic fund sources include Maharlika Investment Corp.'s \$8.8 billion authorized capital stock, composed of \$6.6 billion in common shares and \$2.2 billion in preferred shares.

He assured businesses of transparency and accountability through financial reporting and

audit measures.

Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, who accompanied the President during the Saudi visit, said the signing of the agreements, "which promises a far-reaching impact on the Philippine economy and on the lives of our workers, is a monumental achievement of President Marcos."

Marcos flew to Riyadh to attend the first Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Gulf Cooperation Council (Asean-GCC) Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia.

The Asean and GCC nations, which comprise Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, established ties in 1990.

The summit is the first of its kind that is geared toward advancing areas of mutual interests such as energy security, food stability and economic cooperation, among others.

During the roundtable, at least two of Saudi Arabia's biggest investment companies expressed interest in the Philippines' Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF), Presidential Communications Secretary Cheloy Garafil said on Friday.

Garafil said Mulhan Albakree, executive general manager of the Public Investment Fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Bandar Al Hamali, CEO of Jada, were interested in the MIF.

The Public Investment Fund is the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, which is among the largest in the world.

In his opening remarks, Saudi Ministry of Investment Minister Khalid Al-Falih stressed that Saudi investors are eager to learn from

the Philippines' finances being one of the "most exciting markets" in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

"We want to connect you to key Saudi investors with impressive success stories to share and with the desire to continue building with international presence by investing with partners across the globe, the Philippines being a key one," Al-Falih said.

He praised the Philippine government's efforts to make the country a cashless society by 2030.

Marcos urged Saudi businessmen to invest in the MIF for infrastructure projects.

"We look forward to benefiting not just from Saudi investments but also from the Kingdom's extensive experience in managing such funds," he said.

The President made a pitch for the MIF event after he suspended the implementation of the law, pending a review of its Implementing Rules and Regulations.

Just before leaving for Riyadh on Thursday, he denied that his administration has put the fund on hold, and said "the concept of Maharlika Fund remains a good one," and reiterated that the government remained "committed to having it operational before the end of the year."

"The organization of the Maharlika Fund proceeds apace. And what I have done, though, is that we have found more improvements we can make, specifically to the organizational structure of the Maharlika Fund," Marcos said.

The President is expected to fly home on Saturday afternoon.

CATHERINE S. VALENTE



SRA mulls SRP, warehouse inspection amid refined sugar overprice

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The government is considering imposing a suggested retail price (SRP) and warehouse inspections as retail prices of refined sugar remained overpriced despite the downward trend in the farmgate price of raw sweeteners, Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) administrator Pablo Azcona said yesterday.

In a radio interview, Azcona said the SRA is considering the imposition

of an SRP as white sugar is sold as high as P110 per kilo compared to the P55 per kilo of farmgate raw sugar.

"Our last target for the farmgate price of brown sugar is at P60 (per kilo) and for our consumer, it should be P85 (per kilo) for refined sugar. At present, the farmgate price of our farmers is only at P55, so supposedly the retail price of white sugar should only be P80," he explained.

Azcona added that based on monitoring of the Department of

Agriculture in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of refined sugar ranged between P82 and P110 per kilo from the previous P85 to P110 per kilo. He said the retail price of brown sugar is stable at P70 per kilo.

"We also have a lot of imported sugar (in the market) so there should be a drop (in retail prices)," he noted.

According to Azcona, as of yesterday, the farmgate price of raw sugar decreased to P2,700 per bag equivalent

to P3,400 per bag for white sugar.

He said the SRA already suspended the release of 150,000 metric tons of imported sugar amid the slump in the farmgate price of raw sugar.

"The farmers and millers were complaining on the downward trend in the farmgate price of sugar and the reason given to them is the flooding of sugar in the market, but the retail price has yet to go down," Azcona said.

"Traders will only add their logistics cost and their revenues from the farmers' price of P55 per kilo," he said.

At the same time, Azcona added that sugar farmers are also proposing to the SRA to inspect warehouses to determine the actual volume of sugar in the country.

"The farmer groups are suggesting to check on the warehouses as despite the volume of sugar on record, the retail price remains high," he said.



IRRI, PhilRice, PCIC partner for new rice crop insurance

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) have teamed up to develop an area-based yield index insurance for rice based on satellite data to help Filipino farmers be resilient to climate risks.

The IRRI-PhilRice-PCIC tripartite partnership – formalized through a memorandum of agreement signed during the 6th International Rice Congress yesterday – will bring innovative crop insurance products to improve the resilience of Filipino farmers to climatic risks.

The agreement seeks to help make crop insurance products available to some 2.4 million rice farmers in the Philippines who constantly have to face the risks of losing their yields to calamities such as tropical cyclones, droughts, and floods.

“Basically, the challenge now... from the perspective of the farmers is [how to] disperse information. I think there’s still a limited number of farmers that have been reached by information to help them understand the importance of agricultural insurance as well as the benefits of agricultural insur-

ance,” PCIC vice president for risk management office Sem Cordial said in a briefing.

On average, the country experiences around 20 cyclones every year, with at least eight making landfalls. Climate change also poses a significant threat as it makes the impact of calamities like floods and droughts more severe.

“This partnership is a step toward making insurance protection available to Filipino farmers at a crucial time when we are facing severe weather challenges such as droughts and floods, intensified by climate change. We welcome this collaboration as it aligns with our mission to improve the well-being of rice-farming communities in the country,” PhilRice executive director John de Leon said.

The partnership builds upon an earlier collaboration between IRRI and PhilRice that developed and operationalized a satellite-based rice mapping and monitoring system called Philippine Rice Information System (PRISM).

Operational since 2018, PRISM uses Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) satellite images and a smart detection system to map rice planting areas and planting dates. Using crop growth simula-

tion modeling, it provides timely yield forecasts and end-of-season rice yields.

PRISM data will be used in designing and testing an Area-Based Yield (ARBY) index insurance for rice.

ARBY is a type of crop insurance that provides coverage based on historical average yield of a specific geographic area, rather than individual farmer’s yields, to determine payouts in the event of crop losses.

“The fusion of satellite technology and advanced modeling is revolutionizing how we can insure rice crops. With timely insights into yield forecasts and end-of-season yields, satellite-based ARBY index insurance for rice can help simplify the much-needed coverage for smallholder farmers, paving the way for a more resilient and sustainable future for agriculture,” IRRI interim director general Ajay Kohli said.

This collaboration is supported by the GIAR initiative on Climate Resilience (ClimBeR) which aims to transform the climate adaptation capacity and increase the resilience of smallholder production systems to withstand severe climate change effects in six countries including the Philippines.



Rice imports down 16.37% in October

RICE imports as of mid-October were much lower than the volume shipped a year earlier, the Department of Agriculture (DA) reported.

Bureau of Plant Industry data showed that inbound shipments of the staple as of October 12 totaled 2.71 million metric tons (MT), down 16.37 percent from the year-earlier 3.24 million MT.

For October alone, rice imports were recorded at 35,846.50 MT. Rice imports peaked in April at 513,425.17 MT.

Vietnam remained the country's top source of rice, having shipped 2.43 million MT and accounting for 89.59 percent of total imports.

Thailand followed with 123,072.17 MT, Myanmar with

114,818 MT and Pakistan with 25,545.21 MT.

India, which this week allowed exports of non-basmati white to the Philippines and six other countries after imposing a global export ban in July, shipped 13,604.39 MT of rice.

The remaining volume, 5,610.72 MT, was shared by Cambodia, China, Japan, Italy and Spain.

Given lower rice imports and the impending El Niño, Agriculture Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla said that India's export allocation would help lower retail prices of the commodity in the Philippines.

In a notice on Wednesday, India's Directorate General of Foreign Trade announced that the

Philippines had been given the largest allocation of 295,000 MT.

"If that comes in ... will definitely provide us with the supply that we will be needing, especially at the end of the [ongoing harvest season]," said Sombilla.

She rejected calls to reimpose a rice price cap, which was implemented in September but failed to suppress a surge in rice inflation.

Based on the DA's price monitoring as of October 20, local regular milled rice is priced between P41 and P45 per kilogram (kg) while well-milled rice ranges between P45 and P48 per kg. Premium and special rice were available at P47 to P62 per kg.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



NIA kinastigo sa unfinished irrigation projects

KINASTIGO at kinwestyon ni **Senador Cynthia Villar** ang ilang opisyal ng **National Irrigation Administration** hinggil sa hindi matatapos-tapos na irrigation projects sa buong bansa na nagsimula noong panahon pa ni yumaong Pangulong Benigno "NoyNoy" Aquino III.

Sa ginanap na pagdinig ng Senate sub-committee on finance sa panukalang 2024 budget ng NIA, nailabas ni Villar ang kanyang pagkairita sa unfinished irrigation projects sa bansa.

"You have to decide whether you'll abandon the project or continue with the project," ayon kay Villar, chairman ng Senate committee on agriculture, food and agrarian reform, sa opisyal

ng NIA.

Natuklasan ni Villar ang hindi natatapos na proyekto ng dating administrasyon partikular simula noong panahon ni Aquino, na inilunsad nang matagal pero mababa ang completion rate.

Partikular na tinukoy ni Villar ang Balog-Balog Dam sa Tarlac, na umaabot lamang sa 50% ang nakukumpleto.

"50 percent pa lang hanggang ngayon. Eh kung ako si PNoy ay pagbababarilyn ko kayo kapag di nyo tinapos ang Balog-Balog within my term. Di ba?" giit ni Villar sa pagkadismaya.

"Kaya ka naging Presidente para tapusin mo ang project sa bayan mo. Namatay na si PNoy, 2023 na at nasa 50 percent pa

rin," giit pa niya.

Sa kanyang pahayag, sinabi ni NIA Administrator Eduardo Guillen, na nahaharap sa pagka-kaantala ang ilang proyekto dahil sa "environmental issues."

"Noong masimulan ang project na mai-bid ay maliit lang ang natatanggap nila na yearly allocation, kaya unti-unti ang paggawaat hindi po full blown," paliwanag ni Guillen.

Pero, ibinaling ni Villar ang kanyang atensyon sa Department of Budget and Management kung makatotohanan ang pahayag ni Guillen.

"Nire-release-san namin sila. Kasama po namin sila sa agencies or government-owned and controlled corporations na comprehensively released ang

budget," ayon kay DBM Assistant Director Elena Regina Brillantes.

Ngunit, tinindigan ni Guillen ang posisyon na kahit nag-labas ng pondo ng DBM, hindi kumpleto ang alokasyon.

Sa ganitong punto, nag-pahayag ng pagkadismaya si Villar sa mga unfinished projects, kahit nagsasagawa ito ng kaukulang programa upang malutas ang problem sa agriculture sector.

"Lokohan ba 'yan? Puro sa-lita lang 'yan walang ginagawa. Kaya pala ganito ang agriculture natin eh," ayon kay Villar.

Tiniyak naman ni Guillen na magsusumite ang ahensya ng catch-up plan sa delayed at unfinished projects.

ERNIE REYES



EDITORIAL

OPISYALES NG NIA, SINABON, BINANLAWAN SA SENADO

TODO gisa ang ginawa ni Senador Cynthia Villar sa mga opisyal ng National Irrigation Administration sa budget deliberation ng Senado sa Department of Agrarian Reform at mga ahensiya nito dahil sa mga hindi natapos na proyekto.

Galit si Villar dahil natuklasan niya na karamihan sa irrigation projects ng NIA ay halos 10 porsyento lang ang nagagawa at naiwang nakatiwangwang na. Panahon pa lang ni dating Pangulong Benigno Aquino III ay nasimulan na ang ilang proyekto subalit hanggang namatay na ang nasabing Pangulo ay hindi pa rin natatapos kundi nasimulan lang ang mga proyekto.

Kabilang sa mga proyektong sinabi ng senadora na 10 porsyento lang ang nagawa ang Balington small reservoir irrigation sa Marinduque, Bayawan small reservoir sa Pangasinan at Cabano small reservoir sa Guimaras.

Binatikos pa ng mambabatas ang paglustay ng salapi ng NIA sa feasibility studies na ayon pa sa senadora ay mas nakabubuti sana kung ginastos na lang sa mga proyektong kapaki-pakinabang at kayang tapusin o gawin.

Wala nga namang mangyayari kung puro feasibility ang ginawa ng mga opisyal at tauhan ng NIA sa halip na gawin ang kanilang totoong trabaho na pagpapagawa ng mga irigasyon na dapat pakinabangan ng mga magsasaka.

Sa pagsabon ni Villar sa mga opisyal ng NIA, itinuro ni NIA administrator Eduardo Guillen ang Department of Budget and Management na hindi kumpleto kapag nag-release ng pera kaya nabibinbin ang kanilang mga proyekto.

Maganda ang katwiran ng administrador ng NIA subalit hindi naman tama ang puro simula lang ang gagawin ng tanggapan pagkatapos at hahayaang nakabinbin. Kawawa naman ang mga magsasaka na umaasa sa pangako ng NIA na irigasyon upang makatulong sa kanilang mga pananim.

Sa inis nga ng butihin senadora, sinabi nito na makabubuti pang buwagin na lang ang ahensiya sa halip na puro salita at wala lang gawa ang tanggapan ni Guillen.

Dapat kasing makita ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at ng Senado ang 'sindikato' sa NIA na sumisira sa mismong ahensiya.

Paanong hindi 10 porsyento lang ang magagawa sa mga proyekto ng NIA, hindi pa man nasimulan ang kontrata ay maraming salapi na ang nailabas ng contractor na napupunta sa bulsa ng mga miyembro ng sindikato sa loob mismo ng NIA.



Hirit na ibalik P45 price cap sa bigas, dinedma

Wala pang usapan sa pamahalaan tungkol sa pagpatupad muli ng P45 per kilo na price cap sa well-milled rice na hinihiling ng Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG).

"It is not being considered even. There are no official talks about it," sabi ni National Food Authority Administrator Roderico Bioco kahapon.

Nauna nang nagpahayag ng pangamba ang SINAG na magkaroon muli ng manipulasyon sa presyo ng bigas dahil sumisipa na sa P21 hanggang P23.50 per kilo ang farmgate price ng palay na basa at P26 hanggang P29 per kilo naman kung tuyo.

Mabuti man ito para sa mga mag-sasaka, naniniwala ang SINAG na maaaring gagawin itong dahilan para pataasin ang presyo ng bigas.

Ayon kay Bioco, ang kasalukuyang ani ng bigas ay sapat para sa pangangailangan ng bansa sa loob ng limang buwan o hanggang sa unang mga buwan ng 2024 ngunit may mga hamon tulad ng parating na El Niño o ang matinding tagtuyot.

Aminado si Bioco na kailangang magimbak pa ng mas maraming bigas ang bansa bilang paghahanda sa El Niño. Dagdag niya, ganito rin ang sitwasyon sa ibang mga bansa at lahat ay nagsisikap na masiguro na may suplay sila ng bigas dahil sa El Niño.

Paliwanag pa niya, ito marahil ang dahilan kaya tumaa ang presyo ng palay dahil mas nais ng mga trader na bilhin ang local supply na mas maganda ang presyo kaysa sa mga imported.

Layunin ng NFA na magkaroon ng stock ng isang milyong toneladang

palay o 20 milyong sako.

Para kay Bioco, ang problema ay ang kakulangan ng mga post-harvest facility, at hindi ang presyo at traders ang nagdidikta dahil mataas ang presyo ng bigas sa pandaigdigang merkado. (Eileen Mencias)



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CHIT U. JUAN

Slow food, slow education

One of the most difficult tasks as a speaker and advocate is to talk to older or more mature students. More often than not, older professionals and executives are too learned (they think) to learn something new. Most of them are already set in their ways and to unlearn is a task they need to be consciously doing or be convinced to even start.



This was not the case when Management Association of the Philippines (www.map.org) through its arts and culture committee decided to hold a Slow Food (www.slowfood.com) event to orient MAP members and the public about the movement for good, clean and fair food. We at Slow Food Manila community gathered four chefs to express the ideas through their recipes using old species or forgotten ingredients but presented in novel ways.

We called the event "Bite Size" for many reasons – bite size factoids about Slow Food were mentioned and the expression was in bite-size portions of appetizers, cocktail bites and even easy to eat desserts like the one made with *ube kinampay* (an ancient purple yam variety).

There was foraged *pipinito* (tiny cucumbers) on top of local beef rilette, and adlai grain mixed with rye to become AD-Rye bread with local cheese and tomatoes.

The drinks were just as inventive and new: Atok Benguet cold brew coffee made into a Negroni, and a fermented non-alcoholic pineapple fizz. What was most interesting is the demographics.

The chefs were all below 45 years old (still considered youth) and the audience was a mix of 30-year-olds, MAP's NextGen members below 50 as well as lifetime senior members (mostly seniors) who came to listen and learn.

I had a close up chat with a couple who grew up on processed food and whose doctor daughter is trying to convert them to eat healthier. They seem to be very open to change even at their age, and listened intently to my suggestions on an easy path to changing dietary habits.

First, I suggested, is to detox their pantry of all unhealthy choices. Remove the white stuff – sugar, flour, bread and switch to sourdough bread, brown rice or adlai. And eat meat just occasionally. They nodded in agreement.

Second is to just practice mindful eating. They admit being too busy watching Netflix while munching mindlessly. That has to stop. And to make their meals more varied in taste and quality.

Many of the people in the audience had wrong impressions about Slow Food at the start. Was it about slow cooking? NO, I explained. Was it about tenderizing meat and native chicken in a *tinola*? It's partly the native chicken idea, as we need to respect and support local farmers who still grow native varieties of the fowl. We should also promote the consumption of local eggs from free range chickens who feed on grub and not on commercial feeds. After all, we are what we eat. We need to find out what the cow ate, what the pig ate and what the chicken feeds on. What they all ate is what we end up eating, too.

We must also be conscious of the fish we eat. Most farmed fish feed on scrap food like doughnuts (horrors) instead of algae or smaller fish in the food chain. So, this always begs the question: what is safe to eat now?

Slow Food is not just about safer food choices but the preservation of endangered varieties – usually the forgotten heirloom rice varieties, the local fish from the deep sea, native cattle we still find in Batangas and Negros, local black pig that feeds on vegetables, and chickens that roam freely eating grub and cracked corn, and not cooped up in cages.

Slow Food is about good, clean, fair choices for consumers who get to meet local farmers through our four chefs, for example. They shared with us that even if "farm to table" has been overused by many establishments as a marketing ploy, these four chefs really walk the talk. They get produce from Cavite farmers and I was witness to the community Slow Food Cavite has formed and continues to patronize. I gave the example of a caterer who drives up to Cavite every week to get produce she will use – straight from the farmgate. She gets it at the fair price the farmer quotes and she also saves because they avoid the consolidation fees of middlemen. The farmers save on what usually is their cost to hire a jeepney for transport to a nearby bagsakan or depot. Everybody is happy with the arrangement and it is a fair deal.

All we need is an open mind to find simple solutions to what seem to be insurmountable challenges. For the farmer, how do I sell my produce at fair prices? For the chefs and, ultimately, for us the consumers, how do we get better choices at fair prices? Support local farmers. Eat what is in season. Make your recipes or plan them around what is available in the farms.

A consciousness about Slow Food and its principles is the start of an adult education on sustainability. We are never too old to learn new ways of sourcing food – healthier food for us who are advancing in age. Just being mindful of the food choices we make is already a step in the right direction. The add-on benefit to all these is the preservation of our culture. It is not just about museums and saving bits and pieces of our history. It is about what we do every day, eating three times a day. What we eat can preserve our food culture which is slowly slipping away because of Western influence and the loss of biodiversity in our local farms. Farmers grow lettuce because the market demands it. What if we grow local vegetables instead?

The consumer is a co-producer. The farmer plants what we want to eat. So eat well and eat local, and the farmer will continue to serve us Slow Food.

★



ASF vax importer denies black market caused virus spread

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The importer of the African swine fever vaccine countered the claim of farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura chairman Rosendo So that the sale of ASF vaccine in the black market was the cause of the spread of the virus in the country.

In an interview with **The STAR**, KPP Powers Commodities Inc. legal counsel and spokesman Reynaldo Robles said the ASF outbreak in the country started in 2020, adding that the company was able to secure a special permit from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to conduct field trials in the Philippines.

"We don't sell in the market. In fact, this is not available in the small-scale markets. The

claim that it was the cause of the outbreak is really an attempt to sabotage the impending issuance of certificate of product registration of the government on the vaccine," Robles said.

So has blamed the spread of ASF on the illegal sale of 300,000 vials of ASF vaccine.

"This is impossible as the outbreak started way back in 2020," Robles added.

For his part, KPP head Juancho Robles said that the vaccine, which is manufactured in Vietnam, has undergone rigid farm trials in 550 farms involving more than 600,000 doses in various regions in Vietnam under the scrutiny of their Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the US Department of Agriculture and

the World Health Organization for Animals.

"In fact, the Vietnam government has authorized the nationwide use of the ASF vaccine in their country since July 2023," Robles, brother of the legal counsel, said.

He said the FDA also issued a special import permit for 300,000 doses for large-scale commercial trials at qualified large farms only.

"The proponents of the vaccine confirmed that there have been no untoward incidents reported regarding the trials. Based on the vaccine protocols, the distribution of the vaccine is strictly monitored and reports and confirmation of participation are required from farms that signed up for the trials for monitoring and tracking purposes,"

he added.

According to Robles, all vaccines are accounted for by KPP as an exclusive distributor of the vaccine in the Philippines.

"It has also come to the attention of KPP that some unscrupulous groups have been smuggling fake ASF vaccines and claiming these vaccines are the same ones from Vietnam. It is unfortunate that many farmers are being deceived by these groups, resulting in unmitigated pig deaths," Robles noted.

He added that local agricultural and regulatory authorities are apparently trying to find a way to speed up the approval process for the vaccine so that pig farmers can avail themselves of a safe and effective vaccine to save the country's swine industry.