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Wean PH from agri imports, new DA chief dared

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FROM EXPORTER TO IMPORTER

WEAN PH FROM AGRI IMPORTS, NEW DA CHIEF DARED

By Melvin Gascon
@melvingasconINQ



Francisco Tiu-Laurel
—DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FACEBOOK PAGE

Lawmakers on Tuesday challenged acting Department of Agriculture (DA) chief Francisco Tiu-Laurel to lead the country away from its dependence on agricultural imports, as they lamented how the Philippines has declined from being an exporter of goods to being heavily dependent on imports.

At Tiu-Laurel's confirmation hearing before the Commission on Appointments (CA), Sagip party list Rep. Rodante Marcoleta urged the new DA secretary to come up with strategies to address the problems besetting the country on agriculture that has forced the government to resort to importation.

"The DA is laden with a lot of concern that you have to fix and have to invest in, especially on rice sufficiency, which is widely considered as a political commodity. We hope that with you at the helm, we would no longer need to depend on our neighboring countries for our food sufficiency," he said.

The CA would eventually confirm Tiu-Laurel, after Marcoleta and other CA members raised problems the country is facing on the importation of rice and sugar, which are two of the prime agriculture commodities needed by the country.

"We may need to look for alternative food sources so that time will come that we will no longer need to import rice," he said, noting the risk of the Philippines' dependence on imports.

"Even [Southeast Asian] countries rely heavily on the Mekong River, which can be controlled by China," he said.

Oversupply of sugar imports

Marcoleta also expressed concern over the current state of the sugar industry, with the Philippines having been relegated from a sugar exporter to a purely importing country.

"If I'm not mistaken, we are bound to export another 500,000 metric tons of sugar next year," he said.

In response, Tiu-Laurel said the country may import only around 200,000 metric tons because of the oversupply of imported sugar this year and the abundance of

supply in local markets.

"Based on the assessment of the industry with DA and [Sugar Regulatory Authority], conservatively we will be importing 200,000 tons, assuming there are no adverse weather events," he said.

Conflict of interest

Tiu-Laurel was also confronted over his supposed conflict of interest as part owner of one of the country's major players in the fishing industry.

Opposition Sen. Risa Hontiveros sought confirmation from Tiu-Laurel on his shareholdings with various companies, mainly the fishing industry.

"How will you assure the [CA] that the companies that you used to be part of, especially those in the fishing sector, will not get preferential treatment in the manner that they conduct business from the DA and its attached agencies that regulate the industry?" she asked the DA chief.

Tiu-Laurel said he has already divested ownership from all 68 companies through deeds of donation and sale, as he clarified that he will not exert influence on how the companies will be regulated.

"Basically when I left the companies that I used to hold, we were already professionalized, so we have professional managers running the companies, and very transparent," he said.

He said he has been given specific instructions by his father not to put the family's name in disrepute.

"Our family's dignity is paramount. There should be no special favors for my family's companies, no accommodation [because] my family will not allow that," he said. INQ

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DA, DOH chiefs confirmed by CA

By CECILLE SUERTE FELIPE

The Commission on Appointments (CA) committee on health approved yesterday the ad interim appointment of Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa.

Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri, the CA chairman, expressed belief that the Department of Health (DOH)

is in good hands under Herbosa. It was the second time that Herbosa faced the CA.

"I believe that the DOH is in good hands not only because he was appointed by the President, (but also because) he is well-regarded and well-recommended,"

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Zubiri said, noting that even Philippine Red Cross chairman and former senator Richard Gordon endorsed Herbosa to the DOH portfolio.

The CA, meanwhile, confirmed the appointment of Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

At the CA hearing, Senate Deputy Majority Leader Joseph Victor "JV" Ejercito asked Herbosa about the status of the investigation on the alleged anomalies in the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth) such as fraudulent claims, up-casing, cataract scam, among others, which the Senate investigated two years ago.

Ejercito said the anomalies allegedly involved "some PhilHealth employees, some doctors and some hospitals."

In response, Herbosa said he would make sure those found responsible for the anomalies would be held accountable.

Sen. Risa Hontiveros asked Herbosa about his hostile comment about the community pantries at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Herbosa acknowledged the pain and fear that he had brought upon artist Ana Patricia Non, whom he red-tagged for setting up a community pantry during the pandemic lockdowns.

"For the joke I posted, I was immediately informed by our gender and women's studies to take it down, and within two hours I took it down, and I think the spread was more of the people who captured it and recirculated it. I also underwent gender sensitivity training for a day with the head herself the gender and women's

studies because of this post," he said.

"For the community pantry, I actually resigned as the executive vice president of UP because of the response against my post. I made a formal apology and I continue to apologize for that statement," he said.

"I have already learned early on in the past few days that any comment the Secretary of Health makes on media is already taken as policy, so I will be very careful and wary regarding these lessons I have learned in the past," he added.

Hontiveros cited the Commission on Audit (COA) 2022 report on issues against the DOH such as low utilization of funds, wastage of funds and deficiency in the procurement process.

"May I know if the secretary is aware of the problem or has the secretary been already briefed about the spending performance of the department?"

In response, Herbosa said he had already instructed his officials to formulate a catch-up plan and find ways to improve the department's utilization of funds to address the COA findings.

The Alliance of Health Workers (AHW), however, asked the CA to reconsider Herbosa's appointment.

"Herbosa has shown a disregard for the well-being of health workers, which is particularly concerning during these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic," AHW said in a statement.

The group said an effective health secretary should prioritize the needs and safety of health workers.

It called Herbosa an anti-health worker, a red-tagger who supports the privatization of public hospitals and health services. — With Marc Jayson Cayabyab, Mayen Jaymalin, Romina Cabrera



Herbosa, Laurel get CA nod

By HANNAH TORREGOZA

The Commission on Appointments (CA) has approved the ad interim appointments of Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Dr. Teodoro Herbosa and Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. on Tuesday, Dec. 5.

The CA finally recommended Herbosa's appointment as DOH chief after the CA's Committee on Health bypassed his confirmation as health secretary last September for "lack of material time."

Marcos reappointed Herbosa in September 2023. No member of the committee

objected to Herbosa's appointment.

The CA also approved the ad interim appointment of Laurel, who was appointed by the President on Nov. 3.

Prior to his appointment, Laurel served as president of Frabelle Fishing Corp., known as one of the top

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Herbosa, Laurel get CA nod 1◀

fishing companies in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Laurel's background in the private sector attracted questions from the agricultural sector but Marcos defended his decision to appoint Laurel, saying it is high-time for the country to "have someone who understands very well the problems that the agriculture sector is facing."

During the deliberations on his nomination, Laurel said he views the country's problems on high food prices, low food production, broken food supply chains, lack of irrigation and even climate change and geopolitical disruptions as a challenge.

"And I shall apply my knowledge and experience in building a diversified global company to this achievable goal. I shall apply these lessons to serve our larger family of the Filipino people," Laurel said.

Under his watch, Laurel said the DA will get the help of biologists, data scientists, and academics in dealing with avian flu, African swine fever, red tide poisoning, as well as disease-resistant varieties, El Niño-adaptable seeds and organic fertilizer.

"We will tap national and even international law enforcers in stopping



Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. (left) and Health Secretary Dr. Teodoro Herbosa (Contributed photos)



food hoarders, price manipulators and smugglers," he said.

Laurel said he is ready to execute the President's orders of "cleansing" the ranks of the DA and to "go after the smugglers and increase food production."

"My vision for agriculture is to

make it sustainable, profitable, and appealing to the younger generation. While rice production remains a priority, I see vast potential in livestock, poultry, fisheries and high-value crops, including seaweeds—food that demand government support," the agriculture chief said.



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DA applies import bonds

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said a bond worth 10 percent of the value of applied rice imports will now be implemented before the issuance of permits to ensure that applications will be fulfilled by traders.

The DA recently found out that around 1 million metric tons (MT) of issued permits for rice imports are not immediately being utilized, DA Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr. said during his confirmation hearing conducted by the Commission on Appointments yesterday.

Laurel said holders of rice import permits that are not im-

mediately shipping supplies were asked to voluntarily surrender their documents.

The DA said it is still collating the total volume of rice imports equivalent to the documents returned to the government by traders.

"We have now put in place new systems, conditions for import permits. Each importer must provide a bond. Before, you only need P350 to have a permit and if you do not bring in supplies, nothing happens to you. Now, the bond

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DA

will be equal to 10 percent of the value of the volume that they want to import. The must ship-out date is also lowered to 30 days from 60 days," Laurel added.

The reduced days covering the ship-out date for rice imports was put in effect through DA's Memorandum Circular 53 series of 2023 signed by Laurel on December 4.

"We have shipments coming from India, arranged by the government through the President's intervention. I would not like to say the quantities (of the total upcoming rice shipments) because when I say them, prices of the

commodity go up and down, so I want to protect the people from speculators," Laurel said.

"What I can say is we are covered until end of January until early February," Laurel added.

According to data from the Bureau of Plant Industry's National Plant Quarantine Services Division, as much as 2.94 million MT of imported rice has arrived in the country as of November 16.

Bulk of the volume at 2.62 million MT, equivalent to 89 percent of the total shipments, was from Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Laurel also said

during the same venue that current estimates by the Sugar Regulatory Administration show that the country may not need to import "too much" sugar.

"We feel that next year, we won't need to import too much sugar. This year, the country imported a little bit much and there is still enough stocks in the market. The assessment of the industry and the government, maybe conservatively, we may only need to import 200,000 MT, assuming there are no adverse weather conditions we face," Laurel said. —Jed

Macapagal



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CA confirms Herbosa, Laurel appointments

BY BERNADETTE E. TAMAYO

THE Commission on Appointments (CA) on Tuesday approved the interim appointments of **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. as Agriculture secretary** and **Teodoro Herbosa as Health secretary**.

Laurel said President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has instructed him to weed out scalawags in the Department of Agriculture, go after the food smugglers and increase food production.

Likewise, Laurel said he would seek the help of national and international law enforcers in stopping food hoarders, price manipulators and smugglers.

"The instruction of President 'Bongbong' Marcos is clear: bolster food production and modernize agriculture — a crucial pillar in

building a Bagong Pilipinas (new Philippines)," he said.

"We will get the help of biologists, data scientists and the academe in dealing with the Avian flu, African swine fever and red tide," he added.

Meanwhile, Herbosa has recommended the optional wearing of face masks in enclosed places for people who are at high risk, such as the elderly and those who are prone to illnesses.

Herbosa said that since December is a season of respiratory

illnesses, he advised those who are sick not to attend parties to prevent infecting others.

The Department of Health (DoH) chief informed lawmakers that there is no recorded outbreak in the Philippines so far of the so-called walking pneumonia.

Most children with this form of pneumonia will not feel sick enough to stay at home. Hence, the name "walking" pneumonia, it added.

The my.clevelandclinic.org said the main difference between walking pneumonia and "regular" pneumonia is that walking pneumonia is milder and it usually does not require bed rest or hospitalization.

"In the Philippines, we don't have [an] outbreak according to our epidemiology bureau," Herbosa told the CA when asked about the illness.

Herbosa confirmed that there were cases recorded in China. "But now other countries in Europe have recorded an increase in respiratory illness in children."

He said that pneumonia cases have increased because "it is the season of respiratory illness."

"My advice is the same, [observe] what we learned during the Covid (coronavirus disease) [pandemic like] social distancing, wearing of face mask and cough etiquette so as not to infect others," Herbosa said in Filipino and English.

"If the child is sick, let us not allow [them] to attend classes to avoid infecting other children," he added.

Herbosa's appointment as DoH head was approved at the CA committee level. He will later face the CA plenary to vote on his confirmation.



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Sugar imports likely lower in 2024 – DA chief

SUGAR imports for next year are expected to be lower due to excess supply this year, the Agriculture department said on Tuesday.

Agriculture chief Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said that sugar imports for crop year 2023 to 2024 is estimated at 200,000 metric tons (MT).

"We feel that next year we won't need too much sugar because sugar imports this year were slightly higher and there are still many stocks in the market," Laurel said during the House committee hearing for his appointment.

He added that the assessment was made with the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA).

Sagip party-list Rep. Rodante Marcoleta of the Commission on Appointment, meanwhile, said that Laurel should "temper his expectations" as only a few of the country's sugar mills are working well.

"Out of 27 sugar mills that we have, only five can be considered efficient," Marcoleta said.

He added that these mills have a sugar recovery of about 1.81 bags of sugar compared to other countries like Thailand with a recovery rate of 2.1 bags.

The Philippines' sugar capacity, meanwhile, was at 58 tons, still low in comparison to Thailand's 71 tons.

"Other mills are still inefficient,

we need to audit other mills to find out why their efficiency is still low," said Marcoleta.

For crop year 2022 to 2023, the SRA approved separate importation of 440,000 MT and 150,000 MT of sugar through Sugar Orders 6 and 7.

As of end August 2023, the end of the milling season, SRA forecast the country to have a negative ending stock of 552,835 MT. The decision to import sugar was made to fill in the gap as the country's demand for sugar was estimated at 3.1 million MT.

In October, the SRA halted the release of 150,000 MT of sugar imports in a bid to lift farmgate prices and keep prices directly paid to farmers at around P3,000 per bag.

Last week, the sugar authority said it is pushing for a suggested price (SRP) of refined sugar and urged the retailers to sell the sweetener at P85 per kilo.

SRA Administrator Pablo Luis Azcona said that they are in talks with the Department of Agriculture (DA) to push for the SRP.

Based on the price monitoring report of the DA as of December 1, prevailing prices of a kilogram of refined sugar was P88.36 per kilogram (kg), while washed sugar was priced at P81.94 a kg.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



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Rice import permit rules revised

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has shortened the effectivity of import permits to ensure proper compliance and enough supply of rice in the market.

In a memorandum circular (MC) signed on Monday, the DA said that "the actual product/consignment must be shipped out within 30 days from the date the sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance (SPIC) is issued, regardless of the country of origin."

The previous memorandum mandated traders to use their SPICs within 60 days from the date of permit issuance for products coming from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

member countries, except Myanmar, and 90 days for those coming from Myanmar and other countries.

"The importers shall fully utilize their applied SPICs. Low or no utilization of SPICs may result to sanctions and penalties in accordance with the guidelines as this can create discrepancies in the forecasting being done in relation to the availability of rice supply," MC 53 signed by Agriculture Secretary Francisco

Tiu Laurel stated.

According to the DA, the amendment aligns with their thrust to ensure enough supply and buffer stock of the staple and to ensure the availability, accessibility and affordability of the staple.

"Most of the traders and millers are cooperating with the Department of Agriculture to ensure both the well being of local farmers and producers, and national food security," the department said.

For its part, the Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag

said the memorandum "was issued as a leeway provided by [the] DA to rice importers to make sure that permits provided [to] them are utilized."

Sinag Executive Director Jayson Caingelt said that this will also remove importers who do not utilize import permits.

The country's volume of rice imports as of mid-November went down by 16.7 percent compared to the same period last year, the Bureau of Plant Industry showed.

Inbound shipments of the staple

as of November 16 totaled 2.93 million metric tons (MT), down 16.7 percent from the 3.25 million MT of the same period in 2022.

For November alone, rice imports were recorded at 106,216.15 MT. Rice imports peaked in April at 516,895.173 MT.

Laurel, meanwhile, earlier said that he ordered importers to quickly use their import permits to buy an additional 1 million MT of rice from abroad to ensure sufficient supply and affordable prices of the staple.



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CA confirms DA, DoH secretaries

THE COMMISSION on Appointments (CA) confirmed on Tuesday the appointments of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Pe Tiu Laurel and Health Secretary Teodoro J. Herbosa.

At a hearing on his nomination, Mr. Laurel said he would focus on consulting biologists, data scientists and academics to help the Department of Agriculture (DA) come up with ways to boost production in livestock, rice, poultry and other high-value crops.

He also vowed to tap national and international law enforcers to deal with food hoarders, price manipulators and smugglers.

On the other hand, Mr. Herbosa said the Department of Health (DoH) would look into fraudulent claims in the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth).

He also targets to release within the next three years the remaining P62 billion in coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) emergency allowances for healthcare workers. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**



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Rice import deadline reduced to 30 days

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said rice traders must now observe a 30-day deadline to bring in their rice imports, counting from the date of the issuance of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Import Clearance (SPSIC).

Memorandum Circular (MC) 53 signed by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. amends MC 43, which had given most ASEAN imports 60 days to arrive in the Philippines, and 90 days for grain from Myanmar and other countries.

The new deadline is "30 days, regardless of the country of origin," according to MC 53.

The DA said all the grain shipments are still subject to plant quarantine procedures upon arrival at Philippine ports.

The DA projects rice imports to come in under the 3.8 million metric tons (MT) forecast of the US Department of Agriculture.

In October, the Indian government allocated a 295,000 MT quota for non-basmati white rice to the Philippines.

The DA said importers must fully utilize their SPSICs under threat of sanction for non-compliance.

"Low or no utilization of SPSICs may result in sanctions and penalties in accordance with the guidelines, as this can create discrepancies in the

forecasting being done in relation to the availability of rice," it added.

Mr. Laurel told a House of Representatives committee earlier that he had instructed traders to use up permits for an additional 1 million MT of rice, also within 30 days, to bolster supply.

As of Nov. 16, rice imports amounted to 2.93 million MT, according to the Bureau of Plant Industry.

"The (DA) recognizes the need to ensure enough supply and buffer stock to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of safe rice," it said.

The rice inventory was 2.04 million MT in early October, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

The DA estimates a rice harvest this year of 20 million MT, which would exceed the 19.76 million MT posted in 2022.

Sought for comment, Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura Executive Director Jayson H. Cainglet said that the memorandum will "weed those importers with low or no utilization."

"The real problem is that prices where we import most of rice (Thailand and Vietnam) continue to increase... The folly of relying on the vagaries of the world market has once again been exposed," Mr. Cainglet said in a Viber message.

— **Adrian H. Halili**



Rules for rice import bonds imposition almost complete

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS [@jearcalas](#)

THE Philippines is mulling over requiring rice importers to post a bond amounting to at least 10 percent of their import value to ensure that they will bring in their approved volumes amid non-utilization of import clearances.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. disclosed on Tuesday that the Department of Agriculture (DA) is now fine-tuning the guidelines for implementing the bond requirement for all rice importers in the country.

"We have now put in place new conditions on the import permit. I will be requiring each importer to post a bond, [amounting to] 10 percent of their import value," Laurel told lawmakers during his Commission on Appointment hearing.

"If they cannot bring in their import volume then the bond will be with the government. That is one of [our] stop gap measures," Laurel added.

Laurel explained that the measure is being put in place after he discovered a lot of unused valid sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances (SPSICs) for rice imports.

Laurel revealed that a lot of rice importers have already surrendered their valid unused SPSICs after he gave them a 30-day ultimatum to bring in their approved import volume.

Under the existing rules and regulations, rice importers must first secure an SPSIC from the Bureau of Plant Industry, an attached agency of the DA, prior to bringing in foreign grain stocks in the country.

An SPSIC certifies that an inbound shipment is safe to human and animal health and is not bringing in any pests that would be detrimental to the local agriculture sector.

Laurel also added that he has formally shortened the must ship-out date for rice imports to 30 days from the previous 60 days to 90 days deadline.

"I shortened the deadline so that importers will be forced [to bring in their volume] and would help us

see the actual [rice] situation [of the country]," he explained.

Laurel issued on Tuesday Memorandum Circular (MC) 53 revising the must ship-out deadline for rice imports. Under MC 53, all rice shipments regardless of their origin must arrive in the country within 30 days upon the issuance of their respective SPSICs.

Under the revised import rules, rice importers who will not fully use the approved volume they applied in their SPSICs could face sanctions and penalties.

"Furthermore, the importers shall fully utilize their applied SPSICs. Low or no utilization of SPSICs may result in sanctions and penalties in accordance with the guidelines as this can create discrepancies in the forecasting being done in relation to the availability of rice supply," Laurel said.

Bonds a good mechanism

MONETARY Board Member V. Bruce J. Tolentino said requiring rice importers to post bonds is a good mechanism to ensure that traders and importers engaging in rice importation are "experienced" and "have discipline." Tolentino proposed that the bond be refundable, especially for traders and importers who abide by the state's importation rules.

"If it's refundable then the bond should not push up market prices. But it will help to ensure that traders are serious and experienced," Tolentino

told the BUSINESSMIRROR on Tuesday.

Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) President Danilo V. Fausto earlier proposed that the DA explore requiring rice importers to post a bond to ensure that the imports would arrive in the country.

"If you are really determined to import rice, then at the onset you should post a bond," Fausto told the BusinessMirror in an earlier interview. **(Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/11/24/dachiefs-30-day-ultimatum-on-rice-imports-supported/>)**

Sinag: Weed out idle importers

GROUPS like the Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag) backed Laurel's MC 53, arguing that it would "weed out" importers with low or no utilization of their SPSICs.

Sinag Executive Director Jayson Cainglet earlier proposed to Laurel to "blacklist" rice importers who are not using their approved SPSICs. **(Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/11/27/damust-blacklist-traders-who-will-delay-rice-imports/>)**

The BUSINESSMIRROR broke the story last month that the Philippines's rice imports is close to touching the 3 million metric tons (MMT) territory as the state recently approved the entry of over 1 MMT of foreign supply via private traders and importers.



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Laurel tatalupan mga biyaherong agri exec

Nangako si Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel na personal niyang iimbestigahan ang mga opisyal ng kanyang kagawaran na may unliquidated fund sa kanilang biyahe sa loob at labas ng bansa.

Ito ang naging sagot ng kalihim nang tanungin ni Senador Risa Hontiveros sa hearing ng Commission on Appointments (CA) na umaabot sa P207.76 milyon ang unliquidated cash advance sa mga local at foreign travel ng mga DA official noong 2022.

"I will look into this and audit this myself. Mr. Chair," diin ni Laurel.

Bukod sa mga biyaherong opisyal ng DA, inusisa rin ni Hontiveros ang P24.25 bilyong unliquidated transfer sa implementing agencies at NGOs; nakatenggang 855,493 bag ng binhi at 2,088 iba't ibang mechanization equipment na binili gamit ang Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Funds; mabagal na implementasyon ng 402 farm to market project na pinondohan ng P5.75 bilyon mula 2018-2022;

palpak na implementasyon ng ACEF; P213.13 milyong fund transfers para sa R&D noong 2019-2022 na nananatiling unliquidated; natenggang P284.14 milyon para sa implementasyon ng Coconut Farmers and Industry Development Program (CFIDP) na binalik na lamang sa Treasury.

"Going back to the issue of unliquidated funds, our reading of the COA audit report suggests that this seems to be a perennial problem in DA. The nearly P25 billion unliquidated funds transferred to various entities I mentioned earlier is a case not the only a failure to liquidate," pagsiwalat ni Hontiveros.

"It appears that even internally, this has been an institutional weakness along with non-compliance to procurement rules. There are also unliquidated cash advances for local and foreign travels of DA officials and staff amounting to P207.76 million flagged by COA. On top of those two cases, there is also an unliquidated amount of P99 million to the PS-DBM," dagdag ng senador.



Herbosa, agri chief lusot sa CA

INAPRUBAHAN na ng Commission on Appointment (CA) ang ad interim appointment nina Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa at Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

Si Herbosa ang unang sumalang sa plenaryo matapos iendorso ng CA Committee on Health ang kanyang kumpirmasyon bilang kalihim ng Department of Health.

Sa sponsorship ni Senator Christopher "Bong" Go, binanggit nito ang malawak na karanasan ni Herbosa sa siyensya at kalusugan kung saan naging co-author ito ng Surgical Safety Checklist ng World Health Organization, at tumulong na mag-develop ng emergency medical services sa Palau, Fiji at India.

Maliban diyan, naglingkod din si Herbosa bilang Undersecretary ng DOH, naging Executive vice president ng UP System, at naging Special Adviser to the National Task Force on COVID-19 sa ilalim ng dating administrasyong Duterte.

Sumonod na inaaprubahan sa plenaryo at nakalusot sa kumpirmasyon ng makapangyarihang CA ang fishing tycoon na si Laurel.

Bago ito, tiniyak ni Laurel sa mga kasapi ng CA na hindi papaburan ng mga patakaran ng Department of Agriculture ang mga negosyo at kompanya ng kanyang pamilya patunay din dito ang kanyang pagbibitiw at pag-divest sa mahigit 60 mga negosyo ng Frabelle Corporation. **(Dindo Matining)**



LAUREL TIKLOP SA RECLAMATION

SA harap ng makapangyarihang miyembro ng Commission on Appointments (CA), sinabi ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. na hindi na matutuloy ang reclamation ng Frabelle Corporation sa bahagi ng Las Piñas City.

"Ang alam ko itutuloy lang 'yong sa inner island na portion as you have also relayed na walang issue sa inyo iyon," sagot ni Laurel sa tanong ni Senador Cynthia Villar.

Tinututulan ni Villar ang reclamation ng Frabelle at iba pang proponent ng Manila Bay reclamation project sa bahagi ng Las Piñas dahil matatabunan nito ang wetland park na protektado ng batas at pagsisimulan din ng matinding pagbaha sa bahagi ng Las Piñas, Parañaque City at Bacoor, Cavite.

Ayon kay Laurel, hindi na itutuloy ang reclamation sa katubigan bago sumapit sa lugar ng Cavite.

"If you are going to do that, I appreciate it very much, thank you for your consideration and I hope you will be with me in helping prevent these disas-

trous things and to help the fishing in Manila Bay" wika ni Villar na dumalo online dahil nagpositibo ito sa COVID-19.

Sa isinagawang pagdinig ng Senate committee on environment and natural resources noong Oktubre 24, 2023, isiniwalat ni Villar na ang proyekto ng Frabelle ay nakaladkad sa overlapping ng reclamation project ng Century Peak ni William King sa Cavite.

Dahil sa kontrobersiya, sinuspinde ng isang taon ng Ombudsman sina Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA) Chairman Alberto Agra at Janilo Rubiato, pero kalaunan ay tinanggal din ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.

Nanindigan naman si Laurel na hindi na siya nakikialam sa operasyon ng Frabelle Corp. dahil nag-divest na ito bago pa man siya hinirang na kalihim ng DA.

REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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DA Sec. Laurel, Jr. lusot na sa CA

NAKALUSOT na rin sa komite ng Commission on Appointments ang ad interim appointment ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. matapos ang pagharap nito sa kanyang confirmation hearing.

Matapos ang mahigit isang taon ng pangangasiwa

sa ahensya, nakapagtalaga na rin si Pangulong Bongbong Marcos Jr., ng kalihim na tutok sa mga isyu at iba pang usapin sa Kagawaran ng Agrikultura.

Si Tiu Laurel ay isang fishing tycoon, kababata at matalik na kaibigan ng Pangulo.

Bago ang kumpirmasyon sa

committee level kanina ay binusisi ni Senator Risa Hontiveros ang posibleng impluwensya o "conflict of interest" ng kanyang mga negosyo sa ahensya kung saan tiniyak ng kalihim na hindi papaboran ng mga patakaran ng DA ang mga kompanya at negosyo ng kanilang pamilya.

Nagbitiw at nag-divest na

rin ang Agriculture Secretary sa lahat ng mahigit 60 kompanya na pag-aari sa pamamagitan ng 'deed of sale'.

Dagdag sa mga reporma na gagawin ng kalihim sa ahensya ang reorganization pagsapit ng Enero, pagbabago sa sistema upang maging investor, business, fisherfolk at farm friendly, pagsasaayos sa database ng mga magsasaka at mangingisda, digitalization ng kagawaran at iba pa.

RNT



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Laurel, Herbosa lusot na sa CA

Nakalusot na rin sa Committee on Agriculture ng Commission on Appointments (CA) ang ad interim appointment ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. matapos ang pagharap nito sa kanyang confirmation hearing.

Si Tiu Laurel ay isang fishing tycoon, gayundin ay kababata at matalik na kaibigan ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

Bago ang kumpirmasyon ay binusisi ni Sen. Risa Hontiveros ang posibleng impluwensya o "conflict of interest" ng kanyang mga negosyo sa ahensya kung saan tiniyak ng Kalihim na hindi papaboran ng mga patakaran ng DA ang mga kumpanya at negosyo ng kanilang pamilya.

Nagbitiw at na-divest na rin ng Agriculture Secretary ang lahat ng mahigit 60 kumpanya na pag-aari sa pamamagitan ng "deed of sale".

"I am now 56 and I've been called to serve the country—to lead it out of high food prices; low food production; broken food supply chains; lack of irrigation, cold storage, credit, and other key inputs; and ageing farmers and fisherfolk. Add climate change and geopolitical disruptions to this mix, and the task to feed all 118 million Filipinos becomes even more daunting," ayon pa kay Laurel.

Samantala, matapos na ma-bypass ng CA noong Setyembre, nakalusot na sa makapangyarihang komisyon si Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa.

Nagmosyon si CA Majority Leader Cong. Luis Raymond Villafuerte na aprubahan na ng komite ang ad interim appointment ni Herbosa na siyang kinatigan naman ng mga miyembro.

Bago ang pag-apruba sa ad interim appointment ng kalihim ay maraming katanungan ang ibinato sa kanya ng mga mambabatas kabilang na rito ang mababang utilization ng pondo ng DOH para sa taong 2022, mga kontrobersyal na social media posts nito noong panahon ng pandemic laban sa mga healthcare workers, community pantry at red-tagging, napakatagal na distribusyon ng emergency allowances sa health care workers, interventions at repormang ilalatag sa Universal Health Care Law, at iba pang isyu sa departamento. (Gemma Garcia)



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Next year's budget must address urgent concerns

COMMENTARY

GARY B. TEVES

Pulse Asia's September 2023 survey results show that inflation remains the top-most urgent national concern of Filipinos, consistent with September findings over the past two years. Inflation is followed by increasing the pay of workers and creating more jobs as the second and third top concerns, respectively.

At 6.4 percent, the Philippines has the highest 2023 average inflation rate among its peers. Year-to-date inflation in Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia are only 1.6, 2.8, 3.2, and 3.9 percent, respectively. The Philippines' 2023 average unemployment rate, at 4.7 percent, is also relatively high compared to Thailand's 1.2, Vietnam's 2.1, and Malaysia's 3.6 percent.

Areas of agreement. In the proposed 2024 national budget, P167.5 billion was allocated for boosting food and water security, and around P53.5 billion was earmarked for investments in infrastructure, such as farm-to-market roads, irrigation systems, and post-harvest facilities. Since food inflation is the main driver of overall inflation, improving the efficiency and productivity of the agricultural supply chain is essential.

The proposed budget also includes a 16.7 percent budget increase for the Department of Energy from P2.2 billion in 2023 to P2.6 billion in 2024. Additionally, P1.4 trillion was allocated for the "Build Better More" program. Investments in energy and infrastructure would help attract more investments which could generate more and better jobs for Filipinos.

Areas for improvement. One area of concern is the low budget allocated for agricultural research and development (R&D) and agricultural credit. Thailand's R&D budget in 2023 is around \$373 million while Vietnam's is around \$394 million. Meanwhile, the Philippines' R&D budget is only around \$185 million. Additionally, the Philippines only allocated P19.6 billion

for agricultural credit in 2023 while Thailand and Vietnam allocated P45.7 billion and P67.6 billion, respectively. While the recently approved debt condonation on agrarian reform beneficiaries can improve access to credit, more needs to be done to ensure that all farmers have access to the financial resources they need to succeed.

There should be more rigorous monitoring and supervision of funds to increase the absorptive capacity of the Department of Agriculture (DA). The DA only absorbed 78.1 percent of its budget in 2021 and only 76.3 percent in 2022. By closely tracking and managing funds through regular Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council meetings and involving pertinent oversight committees in both the Senate and House of Representatives, the DA can make better use of available resources, resulting in more efficient project implementation and greater positive impacts in their development efforts.

Several tax reforms were proposed to help fund government programs. Of these, we recommend the urgent passage of the Passive Income and Financial Intermediary Taxation (PI-FITA) bill, the proposed value-added tax (VAT) on digital services, and the proposed excise tax on pre-mixed alcoholic beverages. These reforms are expected to generate a total of P25.5 billion in government revenue for 2024 alone.

Aside from raising more public funds, the PIFITA bill would also help make insurance products more affordable for Filipinos by reducing insurance taxes. The proposed VAT on digital services would also help level the playing field between

local and foreign digital service providers, which would encourage the creation of more jobs.

Our policymakers should also reconsider the passage of the proposed excise tax on sweetened beverages and junk foods while prices remain elevated. While this is expected to generate P75.7 billion in revenue for 2024, it would worsen inflation and underemployment since salty foods such as canned goods and instant noodles are considered staples by many low to middle-income households.

The government must step up its efforts in improving tax collection efficiency, generating other sources of revenue such as the sale of select government assets, privatization of government-owned and -controlled corporations, and engaging in more public-private partnerships to fund its expenditures.

The government should also be very mindful of borrowing more funds as the share of the national budget spent on debt service is increasing. P1.9 trillion, or around 34 percent of the 2024 national budget will be allocated for paying our country's debt. This percentage was much lower at 25.1 percent in 2022 and is programmed to be at 29.7 percent in 2023.

Conclusion. To effectively address the topmost urgent national concerns of Filipinos, the government must allocate more budget to projects and strategies that will address the supply side of inflation and those that will attract more investments that generate more and better jobs.

We hope that the points highlighted above can still be considered by the House and Senate panel members of the bicameral conference committee to make the 2024 national budget more responsive to the topmost urgent national concerns of Filipinos.

Gary B. Teves served as finance secretary under the Arroyo administration.



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DA ready to roll out rice seeds, fertilizers assistance

THE Department of Agriculture (DA), through the Rice Industry Development Office, said the rollout of the voucher system for the seeds and fertilizers assistance provided to clustered rice farmers in five pilot regions will soon be ready.

Glenn Estrada, head of digitalization under the Masagana Rice Industry Development Program, said in a statement the voucher system will be launched using intervention monitoring cards (IMC) that would double up as identification and cash cards for individual farmers.

Regions where the IMC cards

would be distributed include Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Mimaropa and Bicol.

The DA said clustered farmers can transact and buy their seeds and fertilizers from any supplier of their choice with the IMC cards to pay for their orders either in bulk or individually through USSC, Maya or GCash.

Through the voucher system, farmers are also empowered to choose their suppliers of seeds and fertilizers, compared to the previous practice that seeds and fertilizers end up unused due to delayed or unpreferred stocks.

However, the DA emphasized

that clustered farms must all be registered with the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture to access the voucher system and government interventions, including the Rice Farmers Financial Assistance of P5,000 each that is being funded by the Rice Tarification Law.

Earlier, the DA said the Philippines could post a record palay harvest this year despite the expected effects of the El Niño phenomenon.

Leo Sebastian, DA undersecretary for rice industry development, said local palay production this year could "hopefully" reach up to

20 million metric tons (MT) or just slightly below that figure.

In 2021, Philippine local rice production hit a record 19.96 million MT but slightly dropped to 19.76 million MT last year.

The DA said the optimistic projection is driven by the around 300,000 MT yield increase of palay for the first semester of the year compared to the same period in 2022.

Sebastian said the impact of El Niño has yet to be felt, so the DA is preparing for its possible effects as it is seen to amplify temperature for the dry season next year. —*Jed Macapagal*



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Breeding program, tech upgrades urged for dairy industry

FARMERS said the dairy industry requires a breeding program and technical upgrades to service growing demand, which is currently overwhelmingly met by imports.

The Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. (PCAFI) said "there is an urgent need to fund a comprehensive breeding program and hiring of technical personnel and support imports of high-quality parent stock to build up the herd."

The Philippines currently imports about 99% of its dairy requirements.

"For the past 45 years we have been at 1%. Maybe we need to focus (more on dairy) especially on the budget," PCAFI President Danilo V. Fausto said.

According to the **National Dairy Authority**, the Philippines imported 4.46 million metric tons (MT) of dairy products during the first half.

The US Department of Agriculture estimates that imports of dairy will continue to rise 3% to 3.5 million MT in liquid milk equivalent in 2024, in line with the continued increase in demand.

During the third quarter, dairy animal numbers rose 2.3% to 98.88 thousand head, according to the Philippine Statics Authority. Dairy goats accounted for 36.6%, followed by carabaos with 33.2% and cattle 30.1%.

"The dairy sector is a low hanging fruit. It has the highest performance in the agriculture sector with 15.35% average growth for 2022," PCAFI said.

"With appropriate support from (the) government through more funding, it can contribute

tremendously to the growth of the economy," it added.

The dairy industry development program has been allocated P218.03 million for next year.

Additionally, Mr. Fausto said milk feeding programs have been frozen during the second half.

"There is a problem with the milk feeding program, which is the main market of dairy farmers. It has not been implemented for the second half. There's been zero programs," he added. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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PBBM binuking pangalan ng ilang smuggler

Ibinunyag ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. na binanggit na umano ni Pangulong Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr., ang pangalan ng ilang pinaghihinalaang smuggler at target itong aksiyunan ng Department of Agriculture sa unang bahagi ng 2024.

Ginawa ni Laurel ang pahayag sa Commission on Appointments (CA) matapos siyang tanungin ni Senadora Grace Poe kung napag-usapan na nila ng Pangulo ang mga suspek sa agricultural

smuggling sa bansa.

"Yes, a few," sagot ni Laurel sa tanong ni Poe. Hindi naman pinangalan ni Laurel ang mga smuggler.

"Basically, we have those names na (already) of the people that were usual suspects. I have a new intelligence and enforcement unit who are verifying everything so maybe by first quarter of next year we will be moving it already," dagdag niya.

Sabi pa ng kalihim, maghahain din sila ng kaso sa ilang indbidwal

na sangkot sa agricultural smuggling.

Giit ni Poe, dapat seryoso ang gobyerno sa paghahain ng kaso laban sa agricultural smugglers para maipakita na ang epektibo ang batas sa pagpapakulong sa mga smuggler sa bansa.

"Kung masampolan lang isa o dalawang 'yun, hihina ang loob ng iba kasi nagkaroon na ng Exhibit A, ng example. So 'yun lang siguro ang hinihintay natin para magkaroon ng ngipin ang batas," giit ni Poe.

(Dindo Matining)



Supply ng asukal umaapaw

Umaapaw ang supply ng asukal sa bansa dahil sa sobrang importasyon ng Department of Agriculture (DA).

Plano ng DA, limitahan ang importasyon ng asukal sa 200,000 tonelada sa susunod na taon.

Ito ang sinabi ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. sa pagdinig ng kanyang kumpirmasyon sa Commission on Appointment nitong Martes matapos magtanong ang isang kongresista kung nakatakdang mag-angat ng 500,000 tonelada ang bansa sa 2024.

"Based on estimates namin with SRA (Sugar Regulatory Administration), which we've been meeting for the last two weeks, we feel that next year we don't need to import too much sugar dahil this year, medyo naparami nang

kaunti 'yung importation ng sugar at marami pang stocks ngayon sa market," pahayag ni Laurel sa komite.

"Ang assessment ng industry and ng DA with SRA, maybe, conservatively, baka kailangan mag-import mga 200,000 lang assuming there are no adverse weather conditions that we face," dagdag niya.

Sa kabila nito, sinabiha ni 1-Sagip Party-list Representative Rodante Marcoleta na i-temper ang kanyang expectation dahil limang porsiyento lamang ng 27 sugar mills sa bansa ang epektibo.

Hinimok din ni Marcoleta si Laurel, ex-officio chairman din ng SRA, na i-audit ang efficiency ng mga sugar mill para mabawasan ang importasyon ng asukal sa hinaharap. (Dindo Matining)

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P5-M smuggled na frozen meat, bigas nasamsam sa QC

Umaabot sa P5 milyong halaga ng mga frozen meat at bigas ang nasabat ng Inspectorate and Enforcement Team ng Department of Agriculture (DA) sa Brgy. Paltok sa Quezon City nitong Lunes.

Ayon sa mga awtoridad, nakatanggap sila ng report na puslit ang mga produkto na nasa isang warehouse sa Zorra St. Brgy. Paltok kaya agad sila ng nagsagawa ng beripikasyon.

Nasa daan-daang kilo ng mga frozen meat at 1,900 sako ng bigas ang nakuha sa pag-salakay ng Inspectorate at Enforcement Team.

Bukod dito, nakumpiska rin ng ahensya ang 10,700 kilos ng asukal at mahigit 800 kilos ng frozen pangasius fillet, isang uri ng isda.

Dahil sa mga nasabat na produkto, pinaalalahanan ng mga awtoridad ang publiko na tiyaking malinis at ligtas ang kanilang mga binibili sa palengke lalo na ngayong Kapaskuhan.

Magsasagawa ang DA ng mga surprise inspection sa mga pamilihan upang matiyak na walang nakakalusot na mga ibinebentang bulok na produkto.

Nitong Biyernes, nakumpiska rin ng DA ang nasa P40-M smuggled frozen meat sa isang warehouse sa Navotas City. (Doris Franche-Borja)



Inflation slows down to 20-year low



People flock to a public market in Manila. (Reuters Photo)

BY JIMMY CALAPATI

INFLATION continued slowing down, hitting a 20-year low in November, as the growth rates of the heavily-weighted food and non-alcoholic beverages and transportation retreated further.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) yesterday said the consumer price index was at 4.1 percent in November from 4.9 percent the previous month.

The slowdown, however, was not enough to bring the national average, now at 6.2 percent, closer to the government's full-year target range of between 2 and 4 percent.

PSA said the downtrend was primarily brought about by the

lower year-on-year growth rate of the heavily-weighted food and non-alcoholic beverages at 5.7 percent in November from 7.0 percent in October.

This was followed by transport with 0.8 percent annual decrease from 1.0 percent annual growth in October 2023.

The restaurants and accommodation services index with a slower inflation rate of 5.6 percent in November 2023 from 6.3 percent in the previous month also contributed to the downtrend of the overall inflation.

"Food inflation at the national level decelerated further to 5.8 percent in November 2023 from 7.1 percent in the previous

month," Dennis S. Mapa, national statistician and civil registrar general, said.

He added that the deceleration of food inflation was "primarily influenced by the annual decrease recorded in vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas and pulses."

"Also contributing to the downtrend of food inflation were the slower annual increases observed in fish and other seafood and sugar, confectionery and desserts," Mapa said.

Food contributed 49.3 percent or 2.0 percentage points to the overall inflation in November.

Core inflation, which excludes selected food and energy items,

decelerated further to 4.7 percent from 5.3 percent in the previous month. This brings the average core inflation from January to November to 6.8 percent.

Inflation in the National Capital Region (NCR) also decelerated to 4.2 percent from 4.9 percent, while areas outside NCR also decelerated to 4.1 percent from 4.9 percent.

Mapa said all regions outside NCR recorded slower inflation rates during the month relative to their respective October 2023 annual rates, except for Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

"Among the regions, Region II

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INFLATION

(Cagayan Valley) still recorded the lowest inflation rate for the second consecutive month at 2.4 percent, while BARMM recorded the highest inflation at 5.9 percent during the month," Mapa said.

TIGHT STANCE

Eli Remolona, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) governor, said the November inflation is within the central bank's forecast range of 4.0 to 4.8 percent.

"The latest inflation outturn is consistent with the BSP's projections that inflation will likely moderate over the near term due to easing supply-side price pressures and negative base effects," he said, adding that "the balance of risks to the inflation outlook still leans significantly towards the upside."

He said key upside risks are associated with the potential impact of higher transport charges, electricity rates and international oil prices, as well as higher-than-expected minimum wage adjustments in areas outside NCR.

Meanwhile, the impact of a weaker-than-expected global recovery as well as government measures to mitigate the effects of El Niño weather conditions could reduce the central forecast.

"Looking ahead, the Monetary Board deems it necessary to keep monetary policy settings sufficiently tight until a sustained downward trend in inflation becomes evident. The BSP will continue to monitor inflation expectations and second-round effects and take appropriate action as needed to bring inflation

back to the target, in keeping with the BSP's price stability mandate," Remolona said.

The Monetary Board, which meets for the last time this year next week, decided to keep the key rates of the BSP during its last meeting as forecasts show inflation, although still above the government's target, moderated over the policy horizon.

BSP's Target Reverse Repurchase (RRP) Rate was kept at 6.50 percent. The interest rates on the overnight deposit and lending facilities will still be at 6.0 percent and 7.0 percent, respectively.

Key rates are still at their highest in more than 16 years.

STABLE SUPPLY

The National Economic and

Development Authority (NEDA), meanwhile, said the further drop in the inflation rate can be attributed to the "timely implementation of strategies to stabilize food supply amid the anticipated domestic and external headwinds in the coming months."

"With the right interventions in place, including the proper and timely deployment of trade policy, we are confident that we can effectively manage inflation and prevent unnecessary upticks in prices of goods and commodities to safeguard the purchasing power of Filipino families, especially those from the most vulnerable sectors," NEDA Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said.

The country's chief socioeconomic planner added that the

government needs to continue monitoring the inflation situation in the face of continued price pressures coming from geopolitical tensions and extreme weather situations, further fueling uncertainty.

"The sharp drop in inflation for the month of November is a testament to the Marcos, Jr. administration's whole-of-government effort to moderate rising commodity prices, while protecting the most vulnerable sectors from its effects," Department of Finance (DOF) Secretary Benjamin Diokno said.

To help further reduce the upward pressures on the price of rice, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. issued a directive to implement various measures to ensure the affordability of rice prices and to protect consumers after lifting the

price ceiling in October.

Furthermore, intensified investments in flood control infrastructures and post-harvest facilities will stabilize the supply of key agriculture commodities.

These efforts will complement the implementation of the El Niño Mitigation and Adaptation Plan, as well as the expedition of the government's responses to mitigate the impact of calamities and natural disasters.

To ensure food security amid global threats of El Niño and other natural calamities, trade protectionism by other countries and geopolitical tensions, intensified efforts to increase agricultural productivity will be supplemented by measures to improve importation of what is only necessary.



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Nov. inflation eases to 4.1%

Cost of rice increased to 15.8% in same month

By XANDER DAVE CEBALLOS

The cost of rice in the country went up despite the inflation rate easing to 4.1 percent in November, the lowest read-

ing in 20 months since March a year ago.

The inflation record during the month was significantly lower than the eight percent in the same period last



year, and 4.9 percent in October 2023.

However, the cost of rice, which shares a significant contribution to the food inflation rate, still increased to 15.8 percent from 13.2 percent in October.

In September, rice inflation hit a 14-year high of 17.9 percent despite the price cap on rice for nearly a month.

National Statistician Claire Dennis S. Mapa said this could be attributed

to the hike in rice prices in the first two weeks of November.

All three sub-groups of rice increased in November, such as the regular-milled rice which had an average price of ₱46.73 per **► 9**



Nov. inflation eases to 4.1% 1◀

kilogram, from ₱45.42 in October, well-milled rice to ₱52 from ₱51 per kilogram, and special rice to ₱61.47 from ₱60.95 per kilogram.

Eggs also saw an increase in inflation rate to 7.6 percent from 7.5 percent. This has been rising from the last quarter of 2021.

Mapa said the average price of eggs was ₱7.10 during the fourth quarter in 2021, ₱7.50 in 2022, ₱8.50 in 2023.

"Although yung incremental increase kasi ay hindi ganun kalaki, plus yung weight sa inflation basket ay one percent lang kaya hindi ganun kalaki ang effect niya (Although the incremental increase is not substantial, plus its weight in the inflation basket is only one percent. This is the reason the effect [on inflation] is not substantial)," he noted.

However, the increase in rice inflation was offset by annual drops in vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas and pulses to two percent from 11.9 percent, fish and other seafood to 4.9 percent from 5.6 percent, and sugar, confectionery and desserts to 1.5 percent from 4.9 percent.

Further, non-food inflation also dropped further to 2.9 percent from 3.4 percent in October, resulting in deflation in transportation (-0.8 percent from one percent) and slower inflation in restaurant and accommodation services (5.6 percent from 6.3 percent).

National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said the government needs to continue monitoring the inflation situation in the face of pressures coming from geopolitical tensions and extreme weather situations.

Balisacan revealed that the Inter-Agency Committee on Inflation and Market Outlook has proposed to maintain the lower tariff rates on rice, corn and swine meat to ensure sufficient supply and stable prices of rice.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) has projected a strong El Niño to intensify in the coming months until the second quarter of 2024, which could disrupt food production.

"With the right interventions in place, including the proper and timely deployment of trade policy, we are confident that we can effectively manage inflation and prevent unnecessary upticks in prices of goods and commodities to safeguard the purchasing power of Filipino

families, especially those from the most vulnerable sectors," he said.

BSP expects moderate inflation

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said the medium-term inflation path will continue to "moderate" as expected, with the November inflation settling within the central bank's forecast range of four percent to 4.8 percent.

The BSP said Tuesday, Dec. 5, the easing of supply-side pressures and negative base effects will likely result in further slowing of the country's consumer price index (CPI) in the next months. The 4.1 percent November headline inflation is lower compared to October's 4.9 percent due to subdued prices of vegetables and petroleum products as well as the strong peso vis-à-vis the US dollar.

"The latest inflation outturn is consistent with the BSP's projections that inflation will likely moderate over the near term due to easing supply-side price pressures and negative base effects," said the BSP.

It added that the "balance of risks to the inflation outlook still leans significantly toward the upside."

Meanwhile, upside risks to inflation will continue to come from the following: the potential impact of higher transport charges, electricity rates, international oil prices, and the higher-than-expected minimum wage adjustments in areas outside the National Capital Region.

Downside risks or the factors that could reduce the inflation rates are the impact of a weaker-than-anticipated global economic recovery and government measures against the effects of El Niño weather conditions.

The BSP said that until CPI is within the target range of two percent to four percent, it will keep its hawkish or tightening monetary policy bias.

"The Monetary Board deems it necessary to keep monetary policy settings sufficiently tight until a sustained downtrend in inflation becomes evident," it reiterated on Tuesday. "The BSP will continue to monitor inflation expectations and second-round effects and take appropriate action as needed to bring inflation back to the target, in keeping with the BSP's price stability mandate."

The next Monetary Board policy meeting is Dec. 14. This will be the last BSP policy meeting for 2023. (With a report from Lee Chipongian)



Inflation slows to 20-month low

Ahead of next week's meeting, BSP says monetary policy to remain 'sufficiently tight'

BY NIÑA MYKA PAULINE ARCEO

INFLATION almost returned to target in November, slowing for a second straight month and also raising the likelihood that monetary authorities will keep key interest rates unchanged next week.

The 4.1-percent result, down from October's 4.9 percent, was the lowest print in 20 months or since March 2022's 4.0 percent. It was also significantly lower than the 8.0 percent recorded a year earlier.

It was just short of hitting the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas' (BSP) 2.0- to 4.0-percent target but fell within the 4.0- to 4.8-percent forecast for the month. It was also lower than the 4.4-percent median in a *Manila Times* poll.

"The downtrend ... was primarily brought about by the lower year-on-year growth rate of the heavily weighted food and nonalcoholic beverages at 5.7 percent in November 2023 from 7.0 percent in October 2023," the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said in a statement.

Food and alcoholic beverages accounted for a little over half — 52.6-percent share or 2.2 percentage points — of overall inflation.

Food inflation, in particular, fell to 5.8 percent from 7.1 percent in October, which the PSA primarily

attributed to a sharp deceleration in price growth — to 2.0 percent from 11.9 percent — for vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas and pulses.

Restaurants and accommodation services, which had a 13.2-percent share or 0.5 percentage point, also contributed to the overall drop in November with inflation in this category easing to 5.6 percent from 6.3 percent.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy items, further decelerated in November to 4.7 percent from the 5.3 percent

seen in the previous month and the 6.5 percent a year earlier.

Year to date, overall inflation remained above target at 6.2 percent. Core inflation, meanwhile, averaged 6.8 percent.

In a statement, the central bank said inflation would likely moderate over the near term due to easing supply-side price pressures and negative base effects. It warned, however, that risks to the inflation outlook were still leaning significantly toward the upside.

"Key upside risks are associated with the potential impact of higher

transport charges, electricity rates and international oil prices, as well as higher-than-expected minimum wage adjustments in areas outside the National Capital Region," the BSP said.

"Meanwhile, the impact of a weaker-than-expected global recovery as well as government measures to mitigate the effects of El Niño weather conditions could reduce the central forecast," it added.

"The Monetary Board deems it necessary to keep monetary policy

►Low B3

■ LOW FROM B1

Inflation

settings sufficiently tight until a sustained downtrend in inflation becomes evident."

The BSP's policymaking Monetary Board ordered an unscheduled 25-basis-point (bps) rate hike

in late October after inflation rose for a second straight month to 6.1 percent in September.

The easing to 4.9 percent the following month prompted a pause but officials warned that further tightening could not be ruled out.

The BSP's policy rate currently stands at 6.5 percent, the highest since 2007, following rate hikes totaling 450 bps beginning May

last year as inflation surged in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan, in a separate statement, expressed confidence in the government's ability to handle inflation and protect the purchasing power of Filipino families, particularly those in the most vulnerable sectors.

He noted the need to continually monitor the inflation situation amid price pressures arising from geopolitical tensions and extreme weather conditions.

In order to guarantee an ample rice supply and steady prices, Balisacan suggested keeping reduced tariff rates on rice, corn and pork — implemented as inflation spiked last year — that are set to

expire at the end of this year.

"[D]ifferentiated support must [also] be provided to agricultural producers, depending [on] how and when they will be affected by El Niño. Measures to reduce transport and delivery costs are being undertaken as well," he added.

"Effective implementation of these programs is crucial to mini-

mize the impact of high prices on low-income households," Balisacan continued.

"The government is also implementing strategies and programs to improve local food production and supply, and boost the productivity of our farmers by investing in irrigation, flood control, supply chain logistics and climate change adaptation."



Inflation cools to 4.1% in November

By **Keisha B. Ta-asan**
Reporter

HEADLINE INFLATION cooled to its slowest pace in 20 months in November amid easing prices of food as well as restaurant and accommodation services, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said on Tuesday.

Preliminary data from the PSA showed headline inflation climbed 4.1% in November, slower than 4.9% in October and 8% in November 2022.

This was the slowest inflation rate in 20 months or since the 4% seen in March 2022.

It was also lower than the median estimate of 4.4% in a *Business-World* poll of 15 analysts conducted last week, and at the lower end of the 4-4.8% forecast range of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP).

However, November inflation was still above the 2-4% target for the 20th straight month.

Month on month, the consumer price index was nil in November from -0.3% in the previous month.

For the January-to-November period, inflation averaged 6.2%, faster than 5.6% in the same period a year ago. This is still above the BSP's full-year baseline forecast of 6%.

"(Inflation) is going down and without shocks that will happen in the next three weeks, we will see inflation going down," National Statistician Claire Dennis S. Mapa said in mixed English and Filipino at a briefing on Tuesday.

Core inflation, which discounts volatile prices of food and fuel, also eased to 4.7% in November from 5.3% in October and 6.5% in November 2022.

In the eleven months to November, core inflation averaged 6.8%.

"However, there are risks such as rice and oil prices. The situation in November was good because prices of gasoline and diesel have been going down. But we will see what the prices are this December," Mr. Mapa said.

He said the sharp slowdown in November inflation was mainly due to easing food prices, as the heavily weighted food and non-alcoholic beverages index fell to 5.7% in November from 7% in the previous month.

Food inflation decelerated to 5.8% in November from 7.1% in October and 10.3% a year prior. This was the slowest rise in food inflation since 5.2% in May 2022.

Mr. Mapa said the deceleration in food inflation was mainly due to the 2% decline in the vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas and pulses index, a reversal from the 11.9% growth a month ago.

The slower annual increases in fish and other seafood (4.9% in November from 5.6% in October) and sugar, confectionery and desserts (1.5% from 4.9%) also contributed to the downward trend in food inflation.

Inflation, S1/5



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Inflation, from SI/1

On the other hand, higher year-on-year growth rates were observed in the indices of rice (15.8% from 13.2%), and milk, other dairy products and eggs (7.6% from 7.5%).

The average price of regular milled rice last month went up to P46.73 per kilo from P45.42 per kilo in October. The average price of well-milled rice also rose to P51.99 per kilo in November from an average of P51 per kilo a month earlier.

The slowdown in November inflation is also attributed to the 0.8% decrease in the transport index from the 1% growth a month ago. The restaurants and accommodation services index also slowed to 5.6% in November from 6.3% in the previous month.

In November alone, oil companies cut pump prices by P1.90 a liter for gasoline, P4.45 a liter for diesel, and P3.3 a liter for kerosene, data from the Energy department showed.

Meanwhile, inflation in the National Capital Region slowed to 4.2% in November from 4.9% in October, while inflation in areas outside Metro Manila eased to 4.1% from 4.9% in the prior month.

The November inflation rate for the bottom 30% of income households slowed to 4.9% from 5.3% in October and 9.2% last year. The 10-month average stood at 6.9%.

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) in a statement said the slower November inflation can be attributed to the timely implementation of measures to stabilize food supply amid domestic and external headwinds.

"With the right interventions in place, including the proper and timely deployment of trade policy, we are confident that we can effectively manage inflation and prevent unnecessary upticks in prices of goods and commodities to safeguard the purchasing power of Filipino families, especially those from the most vulnerable sectors," NEDA Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said.

'SUFFICIENTLY TIGHT'

Meanwhile, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said it needs to "keep monetary policy settings sufficiently tight until a sustained downtrend in inflation becomes evident."

"The latest inflation outturn is consistent with the BSP's projections that inflation will likely moderate over the near term due to easing supply-side price pressures and negative base effects," it said in a statement.

The BSP said the balance of risks to the inflation outlook "still leans significantly towards the upside."

"Key upside risks are associated with the potential impact of higher transport charges, electricity rates, and international oil prices, as well as higher-than-expected minimum wage adjustments in areas outside the National Capital Region," it said.

A weaker-than-expected global recovery and government measures to mitigate the impact of El Niño could further reduce inflation.

The BSP sees inflation averaging at 6% in 2023 and 3.7% in 2024, before falling further to 3.2% in 2025.

"The BSP will continue to monitor inflation expectations and second-round effects and take appropriate action as needed to bring inflation back to the target, in keeping with the BSP's price stability mandate," it said.

Last month, the BSP kept its target reverse repurchase rate at a 16-year high of 6.5%. The BSP raised borrowing costs by a total of 450 basis points (bps) from May 2022 to October 2023 to tame inflation.

Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) Lead Economist Emilio S. Neri, Jr. said it is possible for inflation to fall below 4% in December and may even reach 3% in the first quarter of 2024 in the absence of supply shocks.

However, Mr. Neri said inflation could rebound to 4% or higher in the second quarter, especially if the effect of El Niño is worse than expected, Mr. Neri said.

"Rice prices are likely to remain the primary factor contributing to inflation in the near future. Local

supply continues to be at a level where rice inflation is usually double digit... The price of rice may stay high as long as supply stays at this level," he said.

Globally, rice supply remains a concern due to a decline in production in major exporting countries like India. The Philippines imports around 15% of its rice requirement every year.

Mr. Neri said BPI sees inflation averaging at 6% this year, before easing to 3.7% in 2024.

"It might be premature to expect rate cuts in the near future despite the improving outlook for inflation. The BSP might need to keep interest rates elevated for most of next year especially given the possibility of an inflation rebound in the second quarter of 2024," he said.

HSBC economist for ASEAN Aris Dacanay said the consistent inflation downtrend should give the BSP room to pause at the Dec. 14 Monetary Board meeting, but rate cuts are still not on the table as there are many upside risks to inflation.

"That said, we continue to expect the BSP to stay pat for longer based on inflation — more so with the need to mind the gap between the Fed and the BSP policy rates to help support the peso," he said.

The US central bank kept borrowing costs unchanged at 5.25-5.5% for the second straight month in November. This was after it hiked policy rates by 525 bps from March 2022 to July 2023.

Following the release of the November inflation data, the peso closed at P55.32 per dollar on Tuesday, strengthening by two centavos from its P55.34 finish on Monday.

This was the peso's strongest close since its P55.19 per dollar finish on Aug. 2.

"We only expect the BSP to begin its easing cycle right after the Fed does its first rate cut. Our baseline view is for the Fed to do its first policy rate cut in the third quarter of 2024," Mr. Dacanay added.



An intellectual giant on Philippine agribusiness: Forecasts and recommendations



PRANONGCREATIVE FROM PIXABAY



(Part 4)

As we usher in a new era in Philippine agriculture with the appointment of Francis Tiu Laurel as the next Secretary of Agriculture, to take the place of President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. himself who kept this portfolio for the first 14 months of his Presidency, we face the stark reality that the Philippines is still far behind our ASEAN peers, i.e., Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia, in rural and agricultural development. It is clear that what the late Dr. Rolando "Rolly" Dy recommended 10 years ago fell mostly on deaf ears. Not much was done to learn from the experiences of our neighbors for one reason or another, mostly for lack of political will and a continuing absence of focus on the most important goal of food security.

For the sake of the new leadership, it would be useful to repeat what Rolly recommended about how the Philippines can learn from our more successful neighbors in the area of rural and agricultural development.

Ten years ago, in his Magisterial Lecture at the UA&P, Rolly quoted from a 2012 McKinsey Report on Indonesia that prescribed

HUMAN SIDE OF ECONOMICS BERNARDO M. VILLEGAS

six pillars for high, sustained and inclusive growth. These were: a.) increasing small holder yield; b.) diversifying into other crops; c.) reducing food wastes and losses; d.) cultivating grasslands; e.) exploiting aquaculture potentials; and, f.) increasing commercial farm yields. Some 80% of the gains will be contributed by the first three. Given the background of the new Secretary of Agriculture, who has headed one of the largest fishing ventures in the southeast region, there should be hope that under this present Administration, we will see a quantum leap in the production and productivity of the fisheries sector.

As mentioned in a former article in this series, despite the constant reference to the primordial importance of land consolidation in such crops as coconut, cacao, coffee, palm oil and a few other products susceptible to large-scale production like bananas and pineapples, a large portion of our arable lands will always be

devoted to small holder cultivation, especially in rice, corn, and vegetables and other high-value crops. This should be the focus of the Government's efforts to improve agricultural productivity, especially in providing the small farmers with farm-to-market roads, irrigation systems, subsidized farm inputs such as fertilizers and insecticides, and access to credit. As regards rice, it would be wise for the Government to listen to the expert advice of people in the private business sector on how to address the ongoing rice crisis. Special attention should be given to the advice contained in a column of former Secretary of Finance Gary Teves, who is now very much involved in the private sector as a member of the board of one of the largest food and beverage conglomerates in the country, San Miguel Corp.

In a column in a leading daily, Gary Teves outlined the following short- and long-term solutions to the ongoing crisis in which rice prices have skyrocketed:

1.) Encourage greater private sector participation in the rice supply chain, particularly conglomerates who can help enhance the efficiency of the rice distribu-

tion system essential to combat disruptions that drive up rice prices.

2.) Closer collaboration between government agencies. He gives the following examples: the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the National Food Authority should work together to develop a rice procurement and distribution plan, specifically addressed to the current crisis. This plan should ensure that farmers get a fair price for their produce and that consumers can buy affordable rice. The DA and the Department of Trade and Industry can also develop a rice market development plan that connects farmers with buyers. In this regard, May-ani, a digital and social enterprise has been helping small farmers get better prices for their products by providing them, through their smart phones, with information on the retail prices of their products on a daily basis. There should be more social enterprises that will help digitalize small-scale agriculture.

3.) Develop more agriculturists who can upskill small farmers in the use of technology to improve their productivity. Here, the concept of "master gardeners" devel-

oped in the United States should be adopted by TESDA (Technical Education and Skills Development Authority)-type of schools in the Philippines.

4.) At the local government level, promote a co-financing mechanism that incentivizes local government units (LGUs) to provide more funding to rice programs. Proceeds from the so-called Mandanas-Garcia ruling should be utilized in these financing initiatives.

5.) Continue implementing the rice tariffication law (RTL) which helps to offset domestic shortages and to stabilize prices.

Among the more long-term measures proposed by Gary are the amending of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law which can promote efficient land use, increased productivity through modernized farming practices, crop diversification, economies of scale through consolidated farms, improved rural infrastructures, better access to credit, market regulation and comprehensive support for smallholder farmers.

Continuing with what Rolly wrote about learning from our neighbors, he cited a report from the Japan International Coop-

eration Agency, or JICA, which indicated that Indonesia would enjoy a substantial expansion of tree crops, particularly rubber, coffee, cocoa, and palm oil, driven mainly by foreign and private investment using modern technology and management. In fact, this happened mainly in the oil palm sector when Malaysia, the former global leader in the production of palm oil, ran out of workers, leading to a substantial increase of Malaysian investment in the oil palm industry of Indonesia. This most populous country in the ASEAN, with the largest land area, soon became the biggest producer in the world of palm oil.

In recent times, however, the largest buyers of palm oil — such as Unilever, Procter and Gamble, and Nestlé — have stopped importing palm oil from Indonesia when they realized that virgin forests were being cut down to make way for oil palm plantations. This has led some of the investors in oil palm plantations to take a closer look at the Philippines since, in the words of one of them, our country has already denuded most of our forests. In fact, there are now some Philippine conglomerates investing in plant-



NOV INFLATION SLOWS TO 4.1% BUT RISKS CITED

By CAI U. ORDINARIO

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INFLATION may have slowed in November, but local economists warned that higher rice prices as well as Christmas spending in December may keep commodity prices elevated.

On Tuesday, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) disclosed that the country's inflation slowed to 4.1 percent. This was slower than the 4.9 percent posted in October 2023 and 8 percent recorded in November 2022. **(Full story here: <https://business-mirror.com.ph/2023/12/05/inflation-slows-to-4-1-in-november-psa/>)**

However, PSA data showed despite the slower headline inflation, certain commodities such as rice posted an inflation rate of 15.8 percent in November, higher than the 13.2 percent posted in October 2023 and the 3.1 percent posted in

November 2022.

"[This] clearly [shows that] the supply side issues hounding the rice industry remain serious," Monetary Board Member Bruce J. Tolentino told BUSINESSMIRROR on Tuesday.

Based on the latest data, the three rice varieties being monitored by

prices at an average of P61.47 per kilo. This is higher than the P60.95 per kilo in October 2023 and P53.53 per kilo in November 2022.

"Internationally, the India ban on certain rice varieties continues to hold, and there is no certainty when it will be lifted. Fertilizer prices are also elevated; note that fertilizer impacts have a lag through the planting cycle," Tolentino said. "Domestically, while the Philippines has had a historically high harvest, there is a lot of suppressed demand."

The elevated rice prices, Tolentino added, may also reflect the uncertainties in the government's own policies when it comes to price control.

He said due to these uncertainties, farmers and traders decided to impose "tight control" on their inventories in case the government again decides to make sudden changes in policy such as imposing price controls.

"[This can] still [be] explained by elevated world prices. The slight increase in the fourth quarter [will] not [be] enough to compensate for reduced importation because of expensive foreign rice. I expect inflation to hold steady or even decline slightly despite Christmas season," Philippine Institute for Develop-

ment Studies (PIDS) Senior Research Fellow Roehlano Briones told BUSINESSMIRROR.

University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) economist Victor A. Abola told this newspaper on Tuesday that the national government can opt to create government-to-government deals to ensure adequate rice supply, especially during the lean months.

These G2G deals, Abola said, can be done "in tandem with private rice importers." He said this will be helpful since El Niño will likely hit the country in the first semester of 2024.

Abola expects inflation to increase to 4.2 percent in December but be below 3 percent in the first quarter of next year, due to base effects.

National Statistician Claire Dennis S. Mapa also admitted that base effects played a role in the inflation rate in November 2023.

It may be noted that inflation peaked in January 2023 at 8.7 percent. But inflation was also high at 8.1 percent in December 2022.

"Without El Niño, my model suggests 3.9 percent average for 2024. However, with El Niño, it will likely be higher even with government intervention," Abola said.

"However, the rise in rice prices would

be offset at least partially by weaker crude oil prices. The latter have eased despite the OPEC+ cuts, which were 'voluntary,'" he added.

For his part, Manulife Investment Management and Trust Corporation Philippines Head of Equities Mark Canizares said rice and Christmas spending could pull up inflation.

Canizares noted that rice prices increased after the lifting of the cap imposed by the government, while the Christmas season is known for higher spending among households.

Monetary policy

GIVEN the slowdown in inflation, the BSP now has room to pause in the last Monetary

Inflation...

CONTINUED FROM A1

PSA showed higher rates in November compared to both the October 2023 and November 2022 rates.

Regular milled rice prices increased to P46.73 per kilo in November 2023, higher than the P45.42 per kilo in October 2023 and P39.57 per kilo in November last year.

Well-milled rice, meanwhile, averaged P51.99 per kilo in November 2023. This was also higher than the average of P51 per kilo in October 2023 and P43.86 per kilo in November 2022.

Special rice varieties also showed higher



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Board in December 2023, according to HSBC economist for Asean Aris Dacanay.

Dacanay said BSP may "stay pat" longer on account of slowing inflation. He said this will be supported by the need to "mind the gap" between the policy rates of the BSP and the US Federal Reserve.

"We only expect the BSP to begin its easing cycle right after the Fed does its first rate cut. Our baseline view is for the Fed to do its first policy rate cut in the third quarter of 2024," Dacanay said.

Meanwhile, Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) economist Emilio S. Neri Jr. thinks it's too early to expect rate cuts from the BSP. He said it was possible for the BSP to keep interest rates elevated in 2024.

This would be the case, given that inflation is expected to increase again in the second quarter of 2024, Neri said. Rate cuts would follow the movements of the US Federal Reserve.

"It might be difficult to cut interest rates without any rate cuts from the Fed given the substantial current account deficit of the country, which could lead to volatility in the exchange rate," Neri said.

Meanwhile, Canizares said if inflation continues to trend lower, interest rate policies by the BSP will likely be kept stable. This means the country could also expect "a more pro-growth monetary stance in 2024."

"If interest rates fall, this is typically positive for capital markets such as Equities. Lower interest rates provide more room for corporates to expand and more propensity for consumers to spend, which will translate to higher economic growth and activity, potentially leading to a more robust equities market in 2024," Canizares said.

Government efforts

SECRETARY Arsenio M. Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Au-

thority (NEDA) said the government must keep monitoring the inflation situation in the face of continued price pressures from geopolitical tensions and extreme weather situations, further fueling uncertainty.

To ensure sufficient supply and stable prices of rice, the Inter-Agency Committee on Inflation and Market Outlook (IAC-IMO) subcommittee on food inflation has proposed to maintain the lower tariff rates on rice, corn and swine meat, Balisacan said.

At the same time, differentiated support must be provided to agricultural producers, depending how and when they will be affected by El Niño. Measures to reduce transport and delivery costs are being undertaken as well.

Latest monitoring by the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) showed a strong El Niño is already present in the country and will intensify in the coming months until the second quarter of 2024. This could bring below-normal rainfall across the country and disrupt food production and energy generation.

Balisacan added that the Toll Regulatory Board and the Department of Agriculture, along with other agencies and tollway concessionaires, are finalizing the details for exempting agriculture delivery trucks from toll increases to mitigate energy- and fuel-related inflationary pressures.

Meanwhile, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board has provided fuel subsidies to 166,598 public utility vehicles as of November 17.

To protect the most vulnerable sectors from high food prices, the Department of Social Welfare and Development launched the Walang Gutom 2027: Food Stamp Program, which provides monetary assistance to low-income households and allow them to purchase selected food commodities from eligible merchants.



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Itlog, bigas tuloy pagtaas ng presyo

Nagbabala ang Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas na may mga banta pa rin sa inflation o ang bilis ng pagtaas ng presyo ng mga bilihin kahit pa humupa ito nitong Nobyembre.

Pasok sa forecast ng BSP ang 4.1% na inflation nitong Nobyembre na mas mababa sa 4.9% noong Oktubre ngunit mas marami pa ring mag-

tutulak nito pataas.

"The balance of risks to the inflation outlook still leans significantly towards the upside," sabi ng BSP.

Ayon kay Philippine Statistics Authority Undersecretary Dennis Mapa, muling nagmahal ang presyo ng bigas at patuloy ang pagmahal ng presyo ng itlog.

Ang bigas ang may pinakamalaking ambag sa inflation at nagmahal ito dahil nagmahal ang presyo ng palay, paliwanag ni Mapa. Umakyat sa P46.73 per kilo ang average na presyo ng regular milled rice nitong Nobyembre mula sa P45.42 noong Oktubre at nagmahal naman sa P51.99 per kilo ang well milled rice mula

sa P51. Nagmahal din ang special rice sa P61.47 per kilo mula sa P60.95 noong Oktubre.

Sabi ni Mapa, tinabla ng pagbaba ng presyo ng mais, mantika, gulay pati na saging na saba ang pagmahal ng bigas at itlog kaya bumaba ang inflation ng pagkain at inumin. **(Eileen Mencias)**



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Wheat, corn retreat

CANBERRA- Chicago wheat futures retreated on Tuesday after major exporters Canada and Australia upgraded their production forecasts, boosting the outlook for global supply.

Statistics Canada raised its estimate for all-wheat production to 32 million metric tons from 29.8 million tons, and Australia lifted its harvest forecast by about 100,000 tons to 25.5 million tons.

The Chicago Board of Trade's (CBOT) most-active wheat contract was down 0.2 percent at \$6.19 a bushel after touching \$6.26-1/2 on Monday, its highest since Aug. 28.

Wheat had risen around 10 percent over the last five sessions, and

received a boost on Monday when the US government confirmed the largest one-off private wheat sale to China since 2020.

"There's still quite a lot of grain in the world," said Andrew Whitelaw, an analyst at consultants Episode 3, adding that he didn't see reason for prices to either fall or rise much in the near term.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) on Monday reported private sales of 440,000 metric tons of US soft red winter wheat to China.

The news hit a market in which speculators hold a huge net short position, making it vulnerable to bouts of short-covering that push prices higher. - Reuters