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Farmers blame importation for plummeting sugar prices

By **GILBERT BAYORAN**

BACOLOD CITY – A labor group has warned of social unrest, joblessness, economic dislocation and collapse of the sugar industry if the price of the sweetener continues to plummet.

"The time that we dreaded most has come," said Wennie Sancho, secretary general of the General Alliance of Workers Associations and convenor of Save the Sugar Industry Movement.

Farmers blamed importation for the low price of sugar, with prices reported between P2,300 and P2,500 per 50-kilo bag.

The reported price for a 50-kilo bag of sugar is below the expected price level of P3,200, which can provide producers and small farmers a comfortable profit margin.

There is more supply, but demand remains the same, according to Sancho, as he blamed the oversupply to the sugar import liberalization scheme policy of the govern-

ment.

Describing it as alarming, Sancho said the sugar import liberalization would adversely affect agrarian reform beneficiaries, small farmers and industrial and mill workers, who depend on the sugar industry.

Conservative estimates show there are around 300,000 sugar workers in Negros and about 500,000 nationwide.

There are about 65,000 sugar farmers in the country, according to Sancho.

"Should the downward trend in sugar prices continue, the effects will be devastating for the labor sector," he said.

He bewailed the government's implementation of sugar import liberalization without assessing the readiness of the industry.

It will be a blue Christmas for workers in the sugar industry if the government will not address the problem, especially with the mill gate price of sugar at P50 per kilo, while retail price remains at P80, he said. In Metro Manila,

retail prices are as high as P100 a kilo.

Sancho said they are joining a call for government intervention as they proposed a dialogue with the planters group to address the issue.

A unified action is necessary to avert the impending disaster, he stressed.

The National Federation of Sugarcane Planters (NFSP) joined other sugar federations in seeking the intervention of President Marcos and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel to address the plummeting sugar prices.

"For the past several weeks, our sugar farmers have been suffering from price levels of P2,500 per bag, which is not commensurate to the financial resources, hard work and risks that farmers invest into their farms. Millgate sugar prices should be at the P3,000-P3,500 level to reflect current retail prices of P85.00 to P100.00 per kilo," NFSP president Enrique Rojas said.

Rojas cited the almost 70:30 ratio in the withdrawal of

imported sugar over locally refined sugar, as reflected in the Sugar Regulatory Administration's sugar production and withdrawal reports for crop year 2023-2024.

"The government should properly manage the sugar supply and demand situation and give preference to locally produced sugar. We recommend that local sugar should be given first priority in the market, before allowing the withdrawal of imported sugar, which was intended originally to fill last crop year's deficit and act as reserve for this crop year," Rojas said.

The Confederation of Sugar Producers Associations Inc. led by Aurelio Valderrama Jr. said traders and importers prefer the cheaper imported sweetener over locally produced sugar because it gives them more profit.

"This is unfair to local sugar farmers, mostly agrarian reform beneficiaries, who are employing millions of Filipinos," Valderrama said.

– With Daphne Rivera

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DA chief gets 6 police escorts

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has tapped the services of the Philippine National Police (PNP) to provide security for him.

Laurel signed Special Order 1484 detailing six police officers to the Office of the Secretary as protective security personnel.

"As such, they shall perform the duties and responsibilities inherent to the designation and such others as directed by the secretary," Laurel said.

The PNP personnel are entitled to traveling expenses, per diems and other incidental expenses that may be incurred in the performance of their

duties, chargeable against Laurel's office and other available funds.

President Marcos appointed Laurel as secretary of the agriculture department on Nov. 3.

Laurel served as president of Frabelle Fishing Corp., the world's third largest tuna fishing company, from 1985 to Oct. 31, 2023.

He was also a member of the Private Sector Advisory Council-Agriculture Sector Group.

Marcos has said he is banking on Laurel's years of experience in the fishing industry to improve the agriculture sector.

— Bella Cariaso



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Marcos inaugurates irrigation project

LUPAO, Nueva Ecija: President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. led the inauguration of the P893-million Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Barangay San Isidro here in this town on Wednesday, December 13.

The National Irrigation Administration (NIA) project, which began in July 2020, has a 27-meter high embankment dam that would provide irrigation for close to 1,000 hectares of agricultural land and will benefit about 560 farmers.

The President said that the irrigation project is part of the government's food sustainability program as well as an alternative solution to the El Niño phenomenon that is expected to hit the country next year.

"This project shall also help address the effects of El Niño," Marcos said. "We must be prepared to counter its effects, which may last until the second quarter of 2024."

Marcos said this is also part of the continued efforts of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the NIA "to boost rice productivity in Nueva Ecija, which is known as the Rice Bowl of the Philippines."

"It shows this administration's steadfast commitment to develop modern infrastructure systems that will enhance our agriculture sector," he said.

Also present during the ceremony were DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., NIA administrator Eduardo Guillen, 2nd District Rep. Joseph Viola-go, San Jose City Mayor Mario Salvador, Lupao Mayor Alex Rommel Romano and provincial board member Ferdinand "Dindo" Dysico.

CELSO CAJUCOM



Group flags smuggling of palm olein

THE United Coconut Association of the Philippines (UCAP) expressed concern over reported technical smuggling of palm olein purportedly for "compounding" of animal feeds to get value-added tax (VAT) and duty exemptions from the government.

"These importers are, however, diverting their palm olein shipments to the domestic market as edible oil and for other purposes, without paying the requisite VAT," UCAP said in its statement on Thursday.

Jesus L. Arranza, former chairman of UCAP and president of the Coconut Oil Refiners Association

(CORA), said he looked into cases of technical smuggling of palm olein based on the information forwarded to him. UCAP said Arranza subsequently wrote a column about this and sent a letter to President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. to seek government intervention.

In response, Senior Agriculture Undersecretary Domingo Pangiban summoned the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI), the agency that is issuing the tax exemptions to palm olein importers, to a meeting, along with Arranza and the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA).

According to UCAP's statement,

the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the PCA are now drawing up plans to combat this technical smuggling of palm olein.

"UCAP is fully supportive of these interventions to put an end to the illegal use of imported palm olein," the group's statement read.

"It is robbing the government of needed revenues and is directly impacting the domestic market of edible coconut oil," it added.

The UCAP includes all coconut-related associations of coconut farmers, refiners, millers, coco chemicals, virgin coconut oil and desiccated coconut, among others. *Andrea San Juan*

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DA sees domestic milled rice output decline in H1 '24 amid El Niño threat

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

[@jearcalas](#)

THE country's milled rice output in the first half of next year could decline by as much as almost 190 million kilograms because of the projected impact of the El Niño on local farms, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The DA has already run the numbers on the possible impact of the anticipated El Niño next year on local rice production.

Based on its calculations, the DA sees two possible scenarios for the country's rice production in the first half of next year.

The DA based its computations on the actual January to June rice production this year and the estimated vulnerable farm areas to El Niño during the dry season.

Based on the National Irrigation Administration estimates, the DA noted that there are about 280,000

hectares of rice farms that would be vulnerable to El Niño.

Of the total vulnerable areas, 20 percent or about 56,000 hectares are serviced by national irrigation systems (NIS), while the remaining 80 percent or about 224,000 are serviced by communal irrigation systems (CIS).

Under the first scenario, the impact of El Niño would reduce the production of NIS-serviced vulnerable rice farms by 20 percent and the output by CIS-serviced areas by 80 percent.

Under this scenario, the DA estimates that palay production in the first semester of next year would decline by 1.73 percent year-on-year to 8,872 million metric tons (MMT) from 9.026 MMT output this year.

This translates to a milled rice output equivalent of about 5.802 MMT, which is about 101,000 MT lower than the 5.903 MMT milled rice production in the first half of this year.

The 101,000 MT milled rice reduction is equivalent to 101 million kilograms.

The DA projected that under the first scenario, the first quarter milled rice production would decline year-on-year by 3.1 percent to 3.027 MMT while second quarter milled rice output would dip slightly to 2.774 MMT.

Under the second scenario, the DA assumed a scenario worse than the first one. In the second scenario, the DA projected that the yield reduction caused by El Niño to NIS-serviced rice farms would be at 30 percent, while CIS-serviced rice farms would suffer a 20-percent yield cut.

Under this scenario, the DA estimated that total milled rice output in the first half of next year would be around 5.718 MMT, about 185,000 MT lower than the 5.903 MMT recorded production this year. The difference in output translates to some 185 million kilograms of rice.

The DA calculations showed that

the country would end the first half with a stock level sufficient only for about 32 days (under the first scenario) and about 34 days (under the second scenario).

It should be noted that the DA assumed that there will be no rice imports in both scenarios it presented.

"Without [rice] imports, we will have less than 39 days at the end of the first semester and 61 days at the end of March, which is very thin supply considering our archipelagic condition. We cannot spread the 61 days [stock level] evenly, so we need to import," Agriculture Undersecretary for Rice

Industry Development Leocadio S. Sebastian told lawmakers recently.

Sebastian emphasized that January and February are considered lean months as domestic rice output is insufficient to meet the country's total demand.

The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) earlier disclosed that the number of drought-affected provinces could reach 65 by May 2024. The DOST noted that the majority of the global climate models suggest that El Niño would likely persist until the second quarter of next year.



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Local coconut group optimistic govt action can address palm oil smuggling

THE Department of Agriculture and the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) are drawing up plans to combat the technical smuggling of palm olein, according to the United Coconut Associations of the Philippines (UCAP).

Jesus Arranza, UCAP past chairman and Coconut Oil Refiners Association president, said he informed President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. about the reported technical smuggling of palm olein being perpetuated by unscrupulous

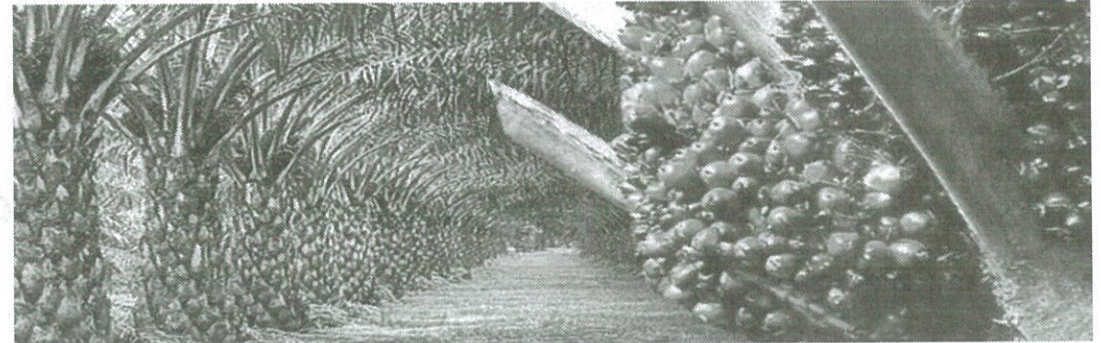
traders who import the commodity for compounding of animal feeds to get value added tax (VAT) and duty exemptions from the government.

However, Arranza said these importers are diverting their palm olein shipments to the domestic market as edible oil and for other purposes, without paying the requisite VAT.

Arranza who is also concurrent Federation of Philippine Industries chairman, said Senior

Agriculture Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban summoned the Bureau of Animal Industry, the agency that issues the tax exemptions to palm olein importers, in a meeting, alongside the PCA.

"UCAP is fully supportive of these interventions to put an end to the illegal use of imported palm olein. It is robbing the government of needed revenues and is direly impacting the domestic market of edible coconut oil," Arranza said. -*Jed Macapagal*



Importers allegedly divert palm olein shipments to the domestic market as edible oil and for other purposes.



Editorial

El Niño action plan implementation must be fast-tracked

THERE were fewer storms that blew into the Philippines this year than during any of the past 25 years. And 2023 is well on its way to becoming the hottest year on record, with temperatures in July spiking to scorching levels.

These are ominous signs that we may be in for the worst El Niño episode ever next year.

In the Philippines, an El Niño is always associated with dry spells and drought conditions. And the developing one is not an exemption.

In 2019, a "severe" El Niño triggered droughts that parched over 13,000 hectares of rice and corn fields, with losses running up to P1.33 billion. Over 16,000 farmers were affected and at least 10 provinces, mostly in Mindanao, declared a state of calamity.

During a briefing last Tuesday, Science and Technology Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. said at least 65 of the country's 82 provinces could experience moderate-to-severe drought conditions from February to May, and six provinces could come under a long dry spell.

To highlight the gravity of the situation, Solidum said the coming El Niño could be comparable to the 1997-1998 episode, regarded as the world's worst El Niño ever.

Already, the El Niño has forced the government to scale down its economic growth forecast. Economic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan has said the higher end of the 6.5- to 8-percent medium-term GDP (gross domestic product) target is unachievable because of projected supply chain disruptions during the El Niño months.

For Balisacan, "managing this El Niño is very crucial. If we intervene enough, early enough and fast enough, we may be able to reduce upward pressure on prices."

Early this year, the government crafted a National Action Plan (NAP) following the first alert of a strong El Niño that will last from December until the second quarter of 2024.

The plan anticipates that El Niño-induced dry spells and drought conditions will threaten five key sectors: water supply, agriculture, energy, health and public safety.

Among the proposed interventions are an intensified water conservation effort, maintaining a stable supply of basic food commodities, minimizing power interruptions, and a close monitoring and reporting of El Niño-related disease outbreaks.

A National El Niño Team created in April will orchestrate the implementation of the NAP.

Last Tuesday, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. directed the Department of Agriculture, the National Economic and Development Authority, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the National Irrigation Administration to categorize actions into short and medium term to mitigate the impact of El Niño.

The President explained that the El Niño team needs to be reconstituted "because we really have to get everybody involved to be able to prepare, to make sure we can minimize, alleviate and adapt to climate change."

Considering that we are approaching the end of the year, we must assume that the El Niño plan is well under way. But Solidum gave a totally different impression when he said, "We need to plan ahead, and we should make it fast."

Did he mean that, at this late stage, the government is still scrambling to activate the plan?

How far has the government gone, for example, in fast-tracking the development of new water sources such as the Kaliwa Dam, which has been mired in environmental issues?

Solidum acknowledged that there is a need "to enhance the communication effort...so that we can have a massive information campaign on what we need to do, what the government is doing and what our kababayan (countrymen) should also be doing."

The public needs to be informed about where they fit in the government's El Niño strategy, and the government appears to be falling short in this task.

The President is trying to fix the problem and ramp up public awareness on El Niño. The information drive must "make people understand what the situation is, what they can do themselves in each household, in the farms, industry, [and] what they can do to help us save water," he said.

To spur them to action, it is important that the people be made to realize how El Niño will affect their lives.

Awareness is the antidote to complacency.



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Farm mechanization and social cohesion

ONE of the main reasons why our agricultural sector is backward and its productivity low compared to neighboring countries is the minimal adoption of modern machinery in our farms. Our agricultural mechanization intensity is around 2.7 per hectare, less than half of Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia.

If machines are not harnessed, this means that labor will have to substitute. It is no wonder then that in rice farming, labor constitutes 37 percent of the total production cost. This is not to mention that our farm labor cost is much higher than in a number of Southeast Asian countries and also in India.

For our smart legislators and policymakers, the knee-jerk remedy is to allot more money for the procurement of more machinery for free distribution to small farmers. As such, successive political administrations made farm mechanization a key component of their agricultural modernization thrust. Sadly, hundreds of billions of pesos have been poured into this program but the effect on productivity is minimal.

Why? The major reasons are that most of the machinery are unused because they do not conform to the tillers' needs or



**FINER
POINTS**

**FERMIN D.
ADRIANO, PHD**

Machines cannot be awarded singly to a small farmer because the country's average land area is around a hectare — too small for machines. A group of farmers will have to be organized to till a sizeable area to make the purchase cost and free distribution economically justifiable.

A study conducted by a team of agricultural engineering professors from UP Los Baños three years ago revealed that less than 30 percent of the machinery distributed under the previous administration were still in operation.

The study was commissioned during the term of then-Agriculture Secretary William Dar as he was worried that under the Rice Competitive Enhancement Fund (RCEF), P5 billion was to be automatically provided yearly for the procurement and distribution of farm machinery from 2019-2025. It aimed to find out what lessons could be derived from previous mechanization

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■ FINER POINTS FROM B1

Farm mechanization and social cohesion

programs and how these could be used in the RCEF program.

The main finding was that recipient farmers' organizations allotted inadequate sums for the maintenance and operations of the equipment, thinking that the government would also provide these. Secondly, since they did not use their own funds to procure the machine, they did not value preserving it because it cost them nothing.

In development literature, the ability by a community or society to act collectively in the pursuit of a common good is termed "social cohesion." It is obvious that our farmers, unlike those in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other countries with highly successful cooperatives, do not exhibit enough social cohesion.

Our culture is not predisposed to exercising social cohesion because of the difficulty in imagining extending the benefits of economic growth beyond the family. In fact, our extended family systems have led to the formation of many FCAs, which in turn are used as conduits in extracting subsidies from the government to benefit members of the extended family.

Worse, a study we conducted of development projects funded by a multilateral agency found out that

many of the machinery, equipment, and amenities ended up being owned by barangay officials or politically influential persons in the community.

But not everything is lost. There are still a number of FCAs that are successfully run or properly managed. What the Department of Agriculture (DA), in collaboration with the Cooperatives Development Authority and the Department of Agrarian Reform, needs to do is to evaluate and identify these FCAs and target them as awardees.

However, instead of distributing the equipment for free, my proposal is for the DA to provide the cash equivalent of the machinery and require the FCA to shoulder the costs of its attachments or implements. For instance, DA can give the money to buy a tractor but the FCA will have to procure implements such as the backhoe, harvester, planter, etc.

By imposing counterpart funding, there will be an incentive for the FCA to set aside money for proper maintenance and operation. It will also encourage the FCA to collect service fees from members for the use of the tractor to generate funds for its maintenance and operation.

The FCA's purchase of implements, meanwhile, will trigger the development of a local fabrication industry

because producing these does not require sophisticated technology. As local fabricators gain more confidence and service a greater market, they can move up the ladder of machine or equipment manufacturing to lessen the costs of the farm machinery.

Will my proposal stand a chance of being adopted? I am certain it will meet a lot of resistance from the DA bureaucracy and legislators because there are hefty commissions to be earned from bidding out billions of pesos worth of machinery.

The clear lesson of development programs and projects in the country is that the more the government participates in implementation, the greater the chances of failure. The less the government intervenes (mainly by confining its role to leveling the playing field) while allowing market forces to operate, the greater the chances of better results.

As for the concept of social cohesion, corrupt bureaucrats and politicians do not care much about it because there are no benefits that can be personally derived in strengthening the foundation of our community, society, and country.

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NIA, DoE eye higher revenues

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE National Irrigation Administration's (NIA) partnership with the Department of Energy (DoE) is expected to generate higher revenue, which will be used for projects to develop the energy sector.

NIA Acting Administrator Eduardo Guillen said on Thursday that the partnership with the DoE, which was formalized on December 7, will optimize the use of renewable energy to help bring

higher revenue.

"As we are [doing] free irrigation, we need non-irrigation additional revenue, [and] this will help in implementing new projects for our farmers," Guillen said during

a public briefing.

He said additional revenue will be collected from companies who will rent and lease spaces owned by NIA such as areas from lakes and irrigation canals.

"NIA will generate higher income in comparison to when we collect irrigation water for farmers," he said.

The DoE will utilize existing NIA irrigation facilities and those being built, including areas identified and listed for future irrigation development projects "for public

consumption" without compromising the operations of NIA.

Guillen also urged for the sector's modernization through more private partnerships.

Last week, the agency signed two separate agreements with different private companies to fast-track irrigation development in the country.

Guillen led the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the BPE Corp. for the installation of a micro-hydro power at the weir of Angat Maasim River Ir-

rigation System South Main Canal in Angat, Bulacan.

Another agreement was signed with the China Railway Construction Corp. Ltd. as part of its pursuit in developing climate-smart, multipurpose irrigation systems and in increasing irrigated areas to contribute to the overall agricultural productivity.

Likewise, Agriculture chief Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. reiterated his call for more investment from the private sector to modernize Philippine agriculture and boost

food production.

"The collaboration of government and the private sector is crucial. We highlight the efforts and dedication of our partners in building sustainable set of option for the future of agriculture and fisheries," Laurel said on Thursday.

The Agriculture chief said private sector partners of the DA could also assist the government in policy and project monitoring to "maximize the benefits derived from these interventions."



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Marcos eyes fiscal measures vs El Niño

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS
and ELLALYN DE VERA-RUIZ

President Marcos said the government will implement fiscal measures to cushion the impact of the El Niño phenomenon in the country which

is expected to last until April 2024, threatening 65 provinces.

Marcos said this after he laid down some of his administration's measures to counter the effects of the looming dry spell on Wednesday, Dec. 14.

In an interview with reporters, the President ensured that the

administration would carry out other strategies to ease the impact of the El Niño phenomenon on Filipinos.

"I think we will also have some other strategies concerning the fiscal measures that we can undertake para mabawasan naman ang load sa ating mga kababayan at kahit na kung

anong mangyari (to lessen the load on our people no matter what happens)," he said.

Marcos said the government is analyzing world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, among other fiscal measures the country could undertake. ►6



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Marcos eyes fiscal measures vs El Niño 14

A task force, to be established as early as next week, will also put together all the data from the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Energy (DOE) for an El Niño database so that the concerned agencies could have access to data for their modeling.

President Marcos said they are still working on the structure and general plan of the task force.

Irrigation

Meanwhile, the Chief Executive said the biggest determinant of the agriculture sector's production levels was irrigation. Better water sources would increase the farmers' number of cropping seasons to three, which, in turn, would increase production immediately by 30 percent.

"So, that's what we are hoping will be the effect of that," Marcos said.

"That is part of the general effort of the DA and of the government to increase our production. It just so happens that that is also what we need to do so that we can secure our rice supply, our food supply," he added.

The President also mentioned a government plan for a massive information campaign about the impending dry spell.

"So, by early next year, we will begin

to disseminate this information and let people know what it is that we are doing, what the forecast is going to be, how everyone can help, and what will be our strategies so that we can alleviate the effects of the drought," he said.

El Niño aid for poor families

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) assured that the agency is ready to assist poor and vulnerable communities.

"On the part of the DSWD, we are committed to help in responding to the impacts of the El Niño, especially to the poor and vulnerable sectors," DSWD Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs Irene Dumlao said.

Dumlao, who also serves as the agency's data privacy officer and co-spokesperson, said the DSWD is working with all government agencies to mitigate the effects of a strong El Niño event that is expected to last until mid-2024.

She noted that the DSWD is part of the food security cluster under President Marcos Jr.' El Niño national action plan.

The food security cluster, which is led by the Department of Agriculture, ensures a stable supply of key food commodities in anticipation of the dry spell and drought.

Dumlao said the DSWD is implementing various projects and programs in response to the President's directive to national government agencies to

prepare for the impending effects of the El Niño.

These include Project Local Adaptation to Water Access or "Project LAWA," which aims to improve the resiliency of communities affected by the El Niño phenomenon.

"The Project LAWA aims to provide additional income support to poor communities, particularly farmers and fisherfolk, as well as provide field community physical assets, such as water ponds that are vital for community economic activities," she said.

Under the project, the DSWD will provide financial assistance as an alternative income in exchange for the work performed by the beneficiaries while constructing alternative water resources through its cash-for-training and cash-for-work programs.

Dumlao said the project, which is currently in its pilot implementation, aims to build 90 small farm reservoirs in nine local government units in Davao de Oro, Ifugao, and Antique.

Project LAWA is being implemented in partnership with the DA and the World Food Programme.

She added the DSWD will provide family food packs and other cash-for-work programs to communities affected by the El Niño phenomenon.



Urban and rural women must unite

For national women empowerment, rural women farmers and fisherfolk must unite with urban women business leaders. Last Dec. 11, this action was decided upon at a meeting hosted by the Alyansa Agrikultura. The primary parties involved were the Pambansang Koalisyon ng Kababaihan sa Kanayunan (PKKK), also known as the National Rural Women's Coalition, and the Women's Business Council Philippines, Inc. (WBC). This follows the direction of Nona Ricafort, past National Council of Women chair, who quotes from Global Peace Women chair Junsook Moon's emphasis on women unity for economic development: "Let us find ways to serve together, and in doing so, we can be healing and hope."

PKKK is a national coalition of 426 organizations in 42 provinces. Its mission is "to work for the empowerment of rural women and the creation of an enabling environment for the fulfillment and protection of rural women's rights." A Centro Saka study revealed: "In spite of their primary role in the food security of the family, only a third of the women respondents have access to production services; less than one-fourth have access to seeds, calamity assistance, training and extension services; and

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

less than a fourth have access to production capital."

WBC is composed of the country's top women business leaders and entrepreneurs. Its mission is "to serve as the voice of women in business and to shape policies for economic empowerment." A key WBC objective is "to influence economic policies and advocate programs to address business concerns in such areas on technology development, training, access to markets and access to finance." Today, WBC is the lead women private sector partner of the government, particularly the Department of Trade and Industry and the Philippine Commission on Women.

Unity imperative

Food security requires a value chain approach that connects production to marketing. Economic development necessitates more cooperation between the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Women economic empowerment requires rural women farmer and fisherfolk united with urban women business leaders. The

former is identified with production and the DA, while the latter is identified with marketing and the DTI. This seeming divide must stop.

The Dec. 11 meeting was led by national coordinator Amparo Miciano of PKKK and president Rosemarie Rafael of WBC. Miciano talked about how PKKK had been working successfully on women's rights. However, PKKK needs help from business leaders on income generation. Rafael discussed women business achievements, with a study showing that they were ranked among the top in the whole world. But the study concentrated on the urban areas. WBC's Alpha Allenigui and PKKK Samar Chapter's Luchie Corrales exchanged views on how WBC could help market PKKK products. Rafael added this could be throughout the value chain in areas such as production, processing, packaging, financing and distribution. On the other hand, PKKK could supply the source materials for WBC members.

Action plan

WBC member and former P&A Grant Thornton chair Marivic Espano suggested that a supplemental study be made by a business organization to analyze the difference between the good status of urban business women and the sad status

of farmer and fisherfolk women. This could point to initiatives that will minimize this disparity. In addition, both organizations agreed to share their websites, list their strengths and weaknesses, identify areas of cooperation, prioritize possible projects and identify one flagship for immediate implementation. This would showcase united women economic empowerment for planned replication.

In 2003, Centro Saka's Romeo Royandoyan and PKKK's Trining Domingo were among the cofounders of the Alyansa Agrikultura. This concentrated on small farmer and fisherfolk rights and incomes. Twenty years later, the Alyansa now wishes to promote a major initiative in rural women's economic empowerment. The forthcoming Jan. 18 action plan meeting between PKKK and WBC leaders will be a significant step in this direction. **INQ**



The author is Agriwatch chair, former secretary of presidential flagship programs and projects, and former undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade and Industry. Contact is agriwatch_phil@yahoo.com.



Rice crisis could be worse in 2024 – farmers' group

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The rice crisis could be worse in 2024 amid the continued spike in the retail price of the grain despite the harvest season, farmers' group Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) national chairman Raul Montemayor warned yesterday.

"At least, we were able to import a lot in the first half of 2023 before the international prices spiked and imports declined," Montemayor told *The Star*.

President Marcos was forced to enforce Executive Order (EO) 39 on Sept. 5 imposing a price cap of P43 and P45 per kilo on regular and well-milled rice amid the high retail price of the staple.

Marcos lifted the price ceiling on Oct. 4, less than a month after the imposition of the EO as the peak harvest season started.

Montemayor added that if the high international prices persist in 2024, the country expects less imports than in 2023.

"With no significant increase in local production, supply dwindled during the lean months (July to August), resulting in high rice prices locally. We don't expect local production to increase significantly," Montemayor noted.

According to Montemayor, the country could experience tightness in supply again around February and March before the dry season harvest and in July to September next year.

"Amidst all these, we lack accurate and credible data on which to base our analysis and decisions," Montemayor added.

Montemayor has said that the Philippine Statistics Authority failed to address the five million metric tons difference in the palay production last year.

He said that despite the peak palay harvest season starting October, there was an upward trend in the retail price of rice.

"We are seeing two reasons here, one,

because of high imported rice. The high imported rice affects the domestic price, causing the (farmgate) price of palay to go up. Second, it is possible that our harvest is not that big, contrary to the claim of the Department of Agriculture (DA)," Montemayor added.

According to him, it was a previous trend that the retail price of rice goes down during the palay harvest but said it did not happen this time.

Montemayor said the expected harvest during the dry season cropping next year would be further affected by the El Niño phenomenon.

"While we still have ample supply now because of the harvest, traders are anticipating that it will not be enough until the next harvest in March. There is speculation especially if no imported rice would come. About two to three months from now, what would be our situation especially with the El Niño, our dry season crop in March and April would be affected and it could be worse in July, August and September, during the lean months next year," he explained.

At the same time, Montemayor said that the prevailing price of palay during the peak harvest was only P25 per kilo but traders are trying to maximize their profit by selling at P60 per kilo.

He said as of now the farmgate price of palay reached P30 per kilo.

Based on the monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of local regular milled rice already reached as high as P56 per kilo; higher than the local well-milled rice of P55 per kilo; local premium rice, P60 per kilo and local special rice, P68 per kilo.

Imported well-milled rice reached as high as P58 per kilo; imported premium rice, P69 per kilo and imported special rice, P65 per kilo.

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DA seeks private sector support to modernize agri sector

By DANESSA RIVERA

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel is seeking inputs from the private sector to formulate national policies and programs that will help fast-track the modernization of the agriculture sector.

A modernized Philippine agriculture will help increase food production and ensure food security, he said.

"Prompting people participation and ensuring sustainable development through sound policy recommendations are key factors that we can embrace to maintain a functional and holistic approach in dealing with the sector's challenges," Laurel told the 9th National Agriculture and Fisheries Volunteers' Day celebration and awarding ceremony of the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF).

The private sector partners of the Department of Agriculture (DA) can also assist the government in policy and project monitoring to "maximize the benefits derived from these interventions."

Since taking over the reins of the DA from President Marcos in early November, the agriculture chief has gone to various parts of the country to meet government officials, investors, industry experts, farmers, fishermen and other sector stakeholders to drum up support for the government's push for food self-sufficiency, reduction of agricultural products importation, and to make agriculture a career option for the younger generation.

"We've been stressing from day one – since I was appointed as the new agriculture secretary – the need to modernize the agriculture sector, not only to feed 118 million Filipinos but ensure food security by practicing a whole-of-nation approach," Laurel said.

He stressed that under the administration of President Marcos, the DA is set to transform the Philippine agriculture sector into a modern industry.

In particular, the agency will step up efforts to mechanize farming, build more ag-

ricultural infrastructure and adopt the latest technologies to improve food production.

The push for agricultural modern-

ization will also focus on equally important sectors like rice, livestock, poultry, fisheries and high-value crops to ensure that affordable food items are readily available and accessible to consumers.

During his confirmation hearing, Laurel said he would rely on science and market data to ensure timely interventions to modernize

agriculture to realize food security and sufficiency, as well as sustainability.

Turn to B5

DA From B1

Laurel said the private sector has been an invaluable partner of the DA in the development process of the industry.

"The collaboration of government and the private sector is crucial. We highlight the efforts and dedication of our partners in building a sustainable set of options for the future of agriculture and fisheries," he said.

PCAF is an attached

agency of the DA that nurtures private-public partnerships in policy development, and promotes and facilitates broad-based participatory development mechanisms and processes in the agriculture and fisheries sector through the National Sectoral Committees at the national level and the Agriculture and Fishery Councils at the regional and local levels.



EDITORIAL

Recycling for irrigation

On orders of President Marcos, the National Irrigation Administration has promised to speed up the completion of irrigation facilities next year. The President had issued the order amid reports that a strong El Niño could cause drought in about 65 provinces, threatening agricultural production and livelihoods.

El Niño's impact in other countries was among the reasons cited for the spike in rice retail prices in the Philippines in the third quarter of 2023. The price spike was due partly to the tightening of rice exports earlier this year by the biggest producers particularly India. In September, as rice retail prices hovered at P50 to P60 a kilo, an ill-conceived price cap was imposed by the Marcos administration: P41 per kilo for regular-milled rice and P45 for well-milled.

With the price caps soon lifted, rice retail prices refused to come down. A farmers' group warned this week of a rice crisis in 2024, partly because of El Niño. Irrigation officials will have to make sure they don't bear the blame for aggravating the problems arising from El Niño-driven drought.

Beyond constructing irrigation infrastructure, the government must improve water management. The country, which is still heavily agricultural, must heed warnings that global warming is likely to bring stronger El Niño episodes. The phenomenon intensifies prevailing weather conditions. In the Philippines' case, it can

mean even more torrential tropical cyclones and destructive flooding as well as worse droughts.

There is technology to harness and store water during the wet season for use during dry periods. The global trend is to develop a circular economy, with zero waste as the objective. In the case of fresh water, it is possible to collect, recycle and reuse the resource, whether for agricultural or potable purposes.

During the wet season, communities get flooded from the continuous release of water from dams. It shouldn't take rocket science to design facilities for the efficient collection and safe storage of that excess water for use even for irrigation during the dry months.

For potable water, so-called gray water or wastewater from households can now be fully recycled into water that is clean and safe enough for drinking. Last year, Maynilad launched a pilot facility for its "New Water" project, which involves recycling used water for potable applications. This is water recycling on an industrial scale. There is also small-scale technology that allows households, communities and private business establishments to collect and recycle used water. Before piped water systems were introduced in the country, many households had cisterns for collecting rainwater for reuse. With government assistance, this can also be done for irrigation, on a larger scale.



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DA to pursue more private sector collaboration

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) will seek out more opportunities to collaborate with the private sector in the area of formulating policy and programs.

In a statement on Thursday, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. said the end goal

is to effectively modernize agriculture.

"We've been stressing... the need to modernize the agriculture sector, not only to feed 118 million Filipinos but to ensure food security," he said, speaking to the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF).

Mr. Laurel added that such collaboration creates options for improving the agri-fisheries sector.

He said that private sector partners can assist the government in policy and project monitoring to "maximize the benefits derived from these interventions." — **Adrian H. Halili**



Krisis sa bigas, titindi sa 2024

Nagbanta ang farmers group na Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) na higit na lulubha ang krisis sa bigas sa taong 2024.

Ito, ayon kay FFF National Chairman Raul Montemayor ay dulot nang patuloy na pagtaas ng halaga ng retail price ng bigas kahit na panahon ng ani ng palay sa bansa.

Anyang makakaranas ang bansa ng kakulangan ng suplay ng bigas sa buwan ng Pebrero at Marso bago ang dry season harvest at sa buwan ng Hulyo hanggang Setyembre ng susunod na taon.

Sinabi ni Montemayor na kahit na may peak palay harvest season simula Oktubre 2024, mayroong magaganap na pagtaas sa retail price ng bigas dahil hindi na kasingdami ang ani ng palay ng mga magsasaka ngayon dahil sa mga kalamidad at El Niño phenomenon bukod sa wala namang aasahang malaking importasyon ng bigas na papasok sa Pilipinas para punan ang malaking demand ng mamamayan sa bigas.

"We are seeing two reasons here, one, because of high imported rice. The high imported rice affects the domestic

NI ANGIE DELA CRUZ
price, causing the farmgate price of palay to go up. Second, it is possible that our harvest is not that big contrary to the claim of the Department of Agriculture," dagdag ni Montemayor.

Sinasabi anyang kagapag may ani ng palay ay bababa ang presyo pero hindi naman ito nangyayari dahil patuloy ang pagtaas ng presyo ng bigas. Ang farmgate price ng palay ngayon ay P30 per kilo. Anyang tumataas ang farmgate price ng bigas dahil sa kakulangan ng suplay.

"About two to three

months from now, what would be our situation especially with the El Niño, our dry season crop in March and April would be affected and it could be worse in July, August and September, during the lean months next year," sabi pa ni Montemayor.

Sa DA monitoring sa mga palengke sa Metro Manila, ang retail price

ng local regular milled rice ay umabot na sa P56 per kilo; local well-milled rice ay P55 per kilo; local premium rice ay P60/kilo at ang local special rice ay P68.

Umaabot naman sa P58/kilo ang imported well-milled rice at ang imported premium rice ay P69/kilo habang ang imported special rice ay P65 per kilo.



TAMING EL NIÑO

THE government will implement fiscal measures to cushion the impact of El Niño phenomenon in the country in addition to other strategies to be carried out by the administration, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. said on Wednesday.

"I think we will also have some other strategies concerning the fiscal measures that we can undertake para mabawasan naman ang load sa ating mga kababayan at kahit nakung anong mangyari," President Marcos said during a media interview in Nueva Ecija after attending the inauguration of an irrigation project.

"We are doing an analysis now of world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, what will be the appropriate fiscal measures that we can undertake, at what level do we do this, how much, what percentage, all of these. Pinag-aaralan natin ngayon 'yan and that

will also become part of the effort," he said.

A task force, to be established most probably next week, will also put together all the data from Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Energy (DOE) for an El Niño database so that the concerned agencies could have access to data for their modeling.

The government is still working on the structure of the task force to show the structure and the general plan, the President said.

But with regard to agriculture, Marcos said the biggest determinant to production levels is irrigation, saying that with better water source, farmers could increase the number cropping season to three, which could increase production immediately by 30 percent.

The President also

mentioned government plan for a massive information campaign with regard to the impending dry spell.

BE PREPARED

The President called for a whole-of-nation approach in combatting the effects of El Niño phenomenon, which is expected to last until the second quarter of 2024 as he reminded government agencies to fast track the completion of irrigation facilities and other structures.

"We must be prepared to counter its effect, which may last until the second quarter of 2024," President Marcos said in his speech during the inauguration ceremony of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Nueva Ecija.

President Marcos reminded the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) to immediately complete the con-

struction of irrigation facilities and other supporting structures based on the needs of the Filipino farmers who will likely be affected by the dry spell.

The President said the government and the Filipino people should work hand in hand to prepare for the worst effects of El Niño, stressing the need to fast track the construction of irrigation projects and other projects that will help address the phenomenon.

The chief executive said he has given the government agencies a deadline to accomplish all El Niño-related mitigation projects.

"Kaya't itong ganitong klaseng proyekto ay naging mas mahalaga pa at naging mas urgent pa. Kaya't dahil kakaunti na lang ang ating natitirang panahon... meron tayong apat na buwan para tapusin lahat 'yan, maging operational na lahat 'yan," President Marcos said.

PCO



EDITORIAL

Water conservation

PRESIDENT Marcos has called for water conservation to cushion the impact of the feared worst drought in decades due to the so-called El Nino phenomenon.

And it is important that concerned offices and agencies ought to finish all water-related projects, mostly for irrigation and power supply, by April 2024.

Marcos told these offices, like the Department of Agriculture and the National Irrigation Administration, that there's a need to mitigate the impact of El Nino.

Set up during the incumbency of President Ferdinand E. Marcos (FEM) in 1963, NIA was tasked to develop and operate irrigation systems in the country.

FEM, father of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" R. Marcos Jr., told NIA to provide irrigation services for the country's agricultural programs.

Sixty-five provinces are seen to experience moderate to severe drought conditions from February to May 2024 due to strong El Nino.

Six provinces are expected to experience potential dry spell, according to the Department of Science and Technology (DOST).

At the same time, the Chief Executive also ordered the creation of "Task Force El Nino" under the Office of the President.

We share the view of Marcos that there's a need to involve everybody to make sure that we can minimize, alleviate and adapt to climate change.

It is only just and right for Malacanang to require concerned state offices and agencies to complete all water-related projects by April next year.

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LOWER TARIFFS ON KEY FOOD ITEMS EXTENDED TILL END-'24

THE President Marcos Jr.-led National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) Board on Thursday approved the extension of reduced tariff rates on key commodities until the end of 2024 to keep local food prices stable amid the volatile supply situation.

In a press briefing, Socio-economic Planning Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan disclosed that the Neda Board at its Thursday meeting greenlit the extension of reduced tariffs rates on pork, rice, and corn under Executive Order (EO) 10.

Balisacan explained that the primary considerations of the Neda Board in extending the lower tariff rates were the insufficient domestic production coupled by world food prices that continue to remain elevated.

"The review of the CTRM (Committee on Tariff and Related Matters) [showed] that there are continuing challenges in the global markets and there are remaining supply issues. In the case of swine, for example, I mentioned the continuing spread of ASF [African swine fever]," he said.

"With respect to corn and rice, we still see shortages, meaning demand [exceeds] production. The shortage would have to be sourced from imports but world prices continue to be elevated. To reduce the impact of high prices coming from imported products, we have to extend the validity of the reduced tariffs," he added.

With the approval, the tariff rates on the following commodities will remain until end-2024: 15 percent and 25 percent for in-quota and out-quota pork imports, respectively; 5 percent and 15 percent for in-quota and out-quota corn imports; and a 35-percent uniform rate for rice imports.

The extended tariff rates will be formalized through the issuance of an EO by the President.

In his capacity as chief executive, Marcos can exercise his power to modify tariff rates when the Congress is not in session.

Marcos can issue the EO as early as December 16 to extend the reduced tariff rates. He has until January 21 to do so.

SEE "LOWER," A2

However, the lower tariff rates under EO 10 would only be effective until the end of this year.

'Great decision'

THE extension of the lower tariff rates on the three commodities was seen in some quarters as a step in the right direction to stabilize domestic food prices and arrest any possible price spikes.

"That is great, a much-needed move given that international prices of key food items are elevated. There is also continued uncertainty due to the combined impacts of conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, plus the worsening threat of drought," Monetary Board member V. Bruce J. Tolentino told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Roehlano M. Briones, senior research fellow at Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), said the administration made a "great decision" in extending the lower tariff rates.

"I hope they push through with the variable tariff scheme notwithstanding WTO [World Trade Organization] qualms," Briones told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Balisacan earlier floated the idea of implementing a flexible tariff scheme as a mitigating measure against the anticipated ill effects of El Niño on domestic food production. (Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/12/14/government-eyes-flexible-tariff-rates-to-ease-inflation/>)

Meat Importers and Traders Association President Emeritus Jesus C. Cham said the extension of the lower pork tariffs is a "wonderful Christmas gift to the Filipino people."

"We look forward to the issuance of the new EO soonest in order to avoid unnecessary delays at Customs," Cham told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Cham also proposed that the semi-annual review of the tariff rates next year to be done in a "timely manner" to avoid unnecessary disruptions in the country's meat trade.

He thinks "tariff hearings that may be needed can be held early in the third quarter. Decisions on tariff rates can then be announced within [the third quarter]. This will enable importers to better plan purchases and arrivals."

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Need for countervailing

HOWEVER, Ateneo de Manila University economist Leonardo Lanzona cautioned that extending the lower tariff rates would have "negative impacts" on local producers of pork, corn and rice.

Lanzona proposed that the government bankroll a program to "mitigate" the negative effects of lower tariff rates on local food producers.

"The government should have a countervailing program for producers to mitigate these negative effects," Lanzona told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

He urged the government to increase the tariffs on coal if it is "serious" in "enhancing" the green sector and "limiting" extreme weather conditions.

"The case for coal is different. If we are serious about enhancing the green sector and limiting extreme weather conditions, then reducing tariffs for coal will be disastrous. The government should raise tariffs on coal, and find other sources of energy for consumption," he said.

Under Marcos's EO 10, the tariff rate on imported coal stays at zero even beyond this year.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) earlier told the BusinessMirror that the lower tariff rates on rice imports should no longer be extended since the reduced rates did not benefit consumers.

FFF was an oppositor during the Tariff Commission hearing on the proposal to extend EO 10 by the economic managers. (Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/12/07/ctrm-wants-to-keep-low-tariffs-on-food/>)

FFF said the lower rice tariff rates diminished the national government's possible tariff collection from rice imports that could have gone to the fund pool earmarked to local rice farmers.

Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas and Cai U. Ordinario



The 'Pinya': Planting legacy



Tito Genova Valiente

ANNOTATIONS

QUIETLY, like the women and men behind the production of these plants, fibers and textile, the news that our Piña textile has been officially recognized by UNESCO, passed almost unnoticed. There is no violence or scandal in this development for it to merit a celebration by the nation. But the same nation obsessed with international recognition should be elated to know that a plant too regular has been added to the list of the heritage elements contributing to our identities as a nation, however inchoate the concept of a political collective may be still to some sectors.

From the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, through Roel Hoang Manipon, managing editor of *Agung*, the official newsletter of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, came this news of UNESCO convening the 18th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. For this year, the said gathering was hosted by the Republic of Botswana from December 4 to 9, 2023.

According to the press release, H.E. Mr. Mustaq Moorad, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of the Republic of Botswana to UNESCO, was the chair of this annual gathering, which will be attended by representatives of States Parties, non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions, and other stakeholders from across the globe. The work of the Committee was to evaluate nominations submitted by States Parties to be added to the Lists of the Convention. This include the following: 6 elements for inscription on the List of Intangible Cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding; 45 elements for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; 4 proposals for the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices; and, 1 International Assistance Request.

The report said the Committee will also "examine 15 reports by States Parties on the status of elements inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, followed by 18 reports on the implementation of the Convention and the status of elements inscribed on the Representa-

tive List in the Arab States.

The said Committee is composed of Angola, Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Czechia, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Malaysia, Mauritania, Morocco, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Republic of Korea, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Uzbekistan, and Viet Nam.

The UNESCO report qualifies many concepts for us with regard to heritage. For the international body, the Intangible Cultural Heritage is also called "living heritage." This includes oral traditions, social practices, knowledge and practices, among other things. Most importantly, it is "continuously recreated as it is transmitted from generation to generation and evolves in response to our environment."

What does UNESCO say about our "Piña?" First, it is listed under "Representative List" and is identified as "Aklan piña handloom weaving." The detailed description says: "Piña is a textile made from pineapple leaf fibres and woven using a handloom. Farmers harvest the leaves of the pinya Bisaya and extract the fibres by hand. The knowledge and skills are primarily passed on within families." At this point, the citation talks of the handloom weaving with the textile as "a strong identity marker." It further identifies the living heritage

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when it underscores the "piña is the preferred textile for making formal attire and is a vehicle for innovation and creativity. It is also a source of livelihood that contributes to sustainable development and to the social and economic empowerment of local communities."

Our Aklan piña handloom weaving joins two dances: one in Nigeria, the Annual Sango Festival of Oyo, which marks the beginning of the Yoruba Traditional New Year in August. The 10-day festival is marked as "connected to the social, religious, cultural and political institutions of the Oyo State" and "encompasses different rites and involves chanting, storytelling, drumming and dancing"; the Dabkeh, "a group dance in Palestine that is accompanied by traditional wind instruments and popular singing." The citation for

In the company of our "Pinya" and the weaving traditions created around it is a charming list, that of the *Ceviche*, a traditional dish in Peru prepared with raw fish marinated in lemon. The citation states: "As recipes vary from one region to the next, the dish strengthens regional cultural identity. It is consumed on a daily basis and during celebrations, social gatherings and rituals."

The dossier made by NCCA in 2019 but submitted in 2022, has been well prepared by the people of the said organization. It narrates thus:

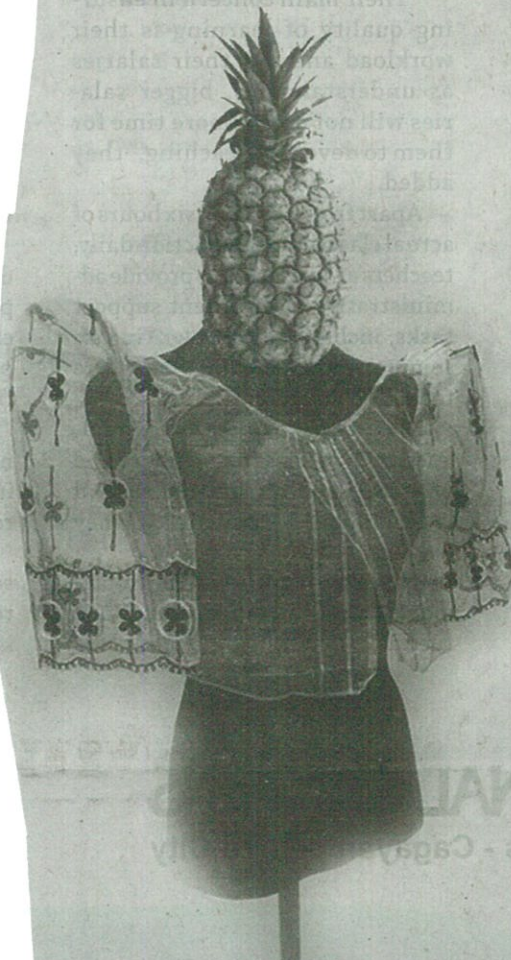
The bearers and practitioners are those of the Aklanon, "also spelled and pronounced as Akeanon, the ethno-linguistic group who practices the element. Their traditional home range is the province of Aklan in the northwestern portion of Panay Island. Like many groups of people in the Philippines, the Aklanon are engaged in agriculture and fishing as main livelihoods, but many Aklanons are also in many different occupations. Currently, the Aklanon population is at 572,599.

It is significant to note that the Aklanon communities have been into the piña textile weaving for more than a century now.

The dossier articulates how both men and women are involved in the process and underscores the fact of the community "involved in the piña textile-making weaving process—from pineapple cultivation, to fiber extraction, to marketing, to preparation, and to weaving of the textiles."

"Pinya Bisaya," the red Spanish variety, is the preferred variety.

As with all heritage, "Piña textile handloom weaving is considered as a family heritage, with each household member having a role—fathers and sons plant the pineapples and construct the looms; while grandmothers, mothers and daughters extract fibers from the leaves, prepare them and weave them." Then the Master weavers enter the scene: it is from them the transmission of this living heritage is realized.



the Palestinian dance reiterates living heritage as a means of expressing cultural identity, celebrating family occasions and increasing social ties, the dance is performed during festivals, celebrations and events such as weddings and graduations.

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Reduced tariff rates for rice, corn extended until end of next year

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

PRESIDENT Marcos Jr. has approved the extension of reduced tariff rates for key commodities such as rice, corn, and pork, until December 31, 2024 amid continuing global challenges such as high prices and limited supply of some basic products, Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan announced yesterday.

Balisacan, in a briefing after the 12th National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board meeting held in Malacañang, said the President approved the draft executive order on the temporary extension of the Most Favored Nation (MFN) tariff rates on certain commodities covered under Executive Order No. 10, series of 2022 until the end of next year.

He said this means that the tariff rates for pork will remain at 15 percent in-quota and 25 percent out-quota, corn at five percent in-quota and 15 percent out-quota, and rice at 35 percent both in-quota and out-quota during the extended period.

The NEDA Board, which is chaired by the President, also approved the recommendations of the Committee on Tariff and Related Matters to modify the review period for the tariff rate on pork, corn, and rice to twice a year, and the tariff on coal to annually or once a year.

"The proposed extension of reduced tariffs will help ensure an adequate supply of agricultural commodities and maintain stable

and affordable prices, thereby better managing potential inflationary pressures," Balisacan said.

"We will also be able to encourage alternative supply to diversify the country's market sources and establish a forward-looking trade policy that will allow effective and timely response for possible supply and price shocks brought about by major challenges," he added.

Balisacan said challenges affecting prices of commodities include the worsening African Swine Fever (ASF), shortages in corn and rice productions that lead to more importation, the anticipated impact of the El Niño phenomenon, and continuous increases in commodity prices in the world market.

GAME CHANGING PROJECTS

Balisacan said the President has also approved the construction of an alternative 23-kilometer, four-lane road to bypass the Dalton Pass in Central Luzon, which he said has been closed several times due to calamities.

The P67.4 billion project, which is expected to be completed by 2031, will facilitate the seamless transport of people and the delivery of essential goods and services within the region.

The NEDA Board also approved four high-impact projects, plans, and policies under the

second phase of the Master Plan on High Standard Highway (HSH) Network Development, which includes 53 projects that

will be implemented in the short-term and to be completed by 2030, medium-term projects that will start construction in 2030 and be completed by 2035, and long-term projects that will start construction in 2035 and be completed by 2045.

"These projects will support connectivity for economic growth and development, efficiency in reducing traffic congestion, environmental sustainability and social acceptability," Balisacan said without naming any of the projects.

Also approved was the eight-point action agenda of the Department of Health's Medium-Term Strategy for the Health Sector from 2023 to 2028.

The medium-term strategy, which aligns with the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) and the Universal Health Care Program, contains priority strategies for the health sector that are divided into three major parts, which are: dedicated for every Filipino, every community, and every health worker and institution in the country.

The medium-term strategy takes into consideration current health outcomes, lessons that can help improve the health system as exposed by the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic, and the implementation of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling on the local government's s tariff shares.

Balisacan said that during the meeting, the Board was also updated on the status of some public-private partnership projects (PPPs), such as the University of the Philippines-Philippine General

Hospital (UP-PGH) Cancer Center Public-Private Partnership Project which is currently undergoing procurement in accordance with the Build-Operate-and-Transfer (BOT) law.

Other updates were also given on the following projects: the Tarlac-Pangasinan-La Union Expressway (TPLEX) extension project that is currently undergoing a Swiss challenge; the solicited proposal to rehabilitate, operate, expand, and transfer (ROET) the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) PPP Project, the deadline for bids submission of which is set on December 27; the upgrade, expansion, operation, and maintenance of the Laguindingan International Airport, the awarding of the contract of which is expected to take place between May 2024 and February 2025; the Dialysis Center PPP project for the Renal Center Facility of the Baguio General Hospital and Medical Center with the bidding for the project set before the year ends; and, the upgrade, expansion, operation and maintenance of the Bohol-Panglao International Airport, the contract award of which is expected to take place between August 2024 and May 2025.

"As we conclude this year, we are committed to sustaining our efforts to place vital programs and projects that will enhance connectivity, generate high-quality employment through investments, and significantly improve the living standards for every Filipino," Balisacan said.



Piña inscribed in Unesco list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

At last, piña handloom weaving, a Filipino cultural tradition of hand-weaving pineapple fibers into fabric, has been internationally identified and recognized as a contribution to the worldwide list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was inscribed as such on December 5 at the Unesco Intergovernmental Committee meeting in Kasane, Botswana.

It was a long time coming. But then the process of application with Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is long and demanding. To begin with it has to be a government agency that must initiate and carry it through with many detailed requirements along the way. The most basic is documentation.

While piña fabric has been in existence here for centuries and regarded as a work of art, it has been contained in the narrow circles of gifts to royalty in the days of colonial dispensations, use by the elite, or exhibition pieces in many museums, or the enduring attention of some textile cognoscenti (it was also a well-known export of the Philippines in the past). We are talking about its international position.

In the Philippines itself, it is a different matter. Tradition, preference and status give piña its premier position as an aspirational piece of clothing or home ornament that is intimately connected to Filipino identity. Used in celebrations of whatever kind from weddings to baptisms to coming out parties and formal occasions, or displayed as part of the home for entertaining or as an accessory, it is well-known, widely accepted and constantly acclaimed.

In a way, it was taken as a known but seriously understated tradition until Lourdes Montinola's pioneering examination of piña in her book that was published in 1991. The book brought piña to wider public attention and reflection about its place in our national life and its longtime inclusion in the worldwide directory of fabrics. It was consciousness-raising about a weaving tradition largely



AMBIENT
VOICES

MA. ISABEL
ONGPIN

taken for granted here.

Piña traditionally comes from Panay island in the Visayas, particularly from the province of Aklan, where the fibers of the Spanish Red pineapple variety are cultivated, processed and woven (all by hand) to produce the piña fabric.

Before World War 2, piña was widely available as there were a good number of weavers at work for a ready market though in a much smaller population. The disruption of the war and its economic consequences brought about a decline in the industry, comparatively speaking. The result was fewer weavers coming to their own, many leaving the trade to an older generation without the incentive for younger people to be part of it.

This seems to have changed in recent years with a more intense consciousness of Filipino identity, the momentum of demand, particularly through the auspices of Filipino designers and the advocacy of non-government organizations and its promotion by commercial enterprises. There is, too, the call of memory in calmer times to revive and pursue a unique tradition of the past.

The Unesco recognition is the crowning glory of the moment. For this, the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA), which has been the principal mover, must be commended. It took many years of assiduous application, research and documentation to get there.

At a press conference this week to announce and celebrate the piña's inclusion on the list of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, NCCA Chairman Victorino Manalo, on whose watch it was achieved, thanked many of those involved — particularly the lead documentarists who undertook the tedious work of describing



the piña-making process — Renee Talavera, Nestor Horfila and Roel Hoan Manipon, along with the communities in Aklan which gave vital assistance.

Aklan Gov. Jose Enrique Mra-flores, a strong government supporter, along with Kalibo, Aklan Mayor Juris Sucro and many other Aklan citizens, particularly the weaving community, were part of the effort.

Many NCCA officials were also essential contributors to make the application with Unesco move forward to its eventual success.

A stand-out supporter from years back is Sen. Lorna Regina "Loren" Legarda, who has been giving material and moral support to Filipino cultural traditions for years by providing encouragement, budget resources and innumerable personal efforts to inform, publicize and document them. She has been the principal sponsor for the School of Living Traditions (also Unesco-listed as Good Safeguarding Practices), which is a government program to preserve, revive, develop and spread Filipino cultural traditions which are so vital to our Filipino identity as history and continuing practice.

Most especially, the press conference was in homage to the piña weavers, principally from Aklan, but now also present in the Camarines provinces, Iloilo, Antique and Palawan. Master weavers like the well-known and acclaimed Ana India Legaspi, a pioneer in creative piña weaving who has achieved international fame, were present.

Together with another well-known generational family of weavers from

Aklan, the Cruz family now led by Ursulita de la Cruz, and the La Herminia Group represented by Aileen Tumbokon, are perennial winners of the Lourdes Montinola Piña Weaving Competition held yearly by HABI: The Philippine Textile Council (Disclosure: I am a member of HABI). Also another winner and designated master weaver is Raquel Eliserio, who comes from a continuing generation of piña weavers who held on through thick and thin. Raquel Eliserio has shared her weaving knowledge with others far afield from Aklan.

This is cultural diffusion in modern times that goes farther and faster. Eliserio, who was a speaker at the press conference, narrated her journey in piña from the tradition of her family, her own entrepreneurial efforts with their ups and downs, her own role in teaching piña weaving in other provincial communities and then coming to the final phase of full public, local and national government support from the NCCA and the Department of Foreign Affairs (represented by Undersecretary Maria Teresa Lazaro) who piloted the final phase of the journey toward the Unesco award, Senator Legarda, the ever-loyal and constructive pillar of support plus an audience of Filipino citizens who recognize and support piña — the Aklan local government officials, Filipino textile advocates, the media and the general public. All of whom were represented at the press conference. Included here is the Department of Science and Technology through its agency, the Philippine Textile Research Institute, which has pioneered new piña processes like piña leather, natural dye workshops and other enhancements to piña.

This was overwhelming enough to elicit tears of joy from Eliserio in her talk. She has passed on her piña acumen to a son who has carried it further and a young daughter who has won piña weaving competition awards.

Hail to piña, a uniquely tangible and intangible Filipino tradition which is alive and well, and will be better.



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Using food waste and unused space to feed Filipinos

Once in a while, there will be a story about farmers dumping their produce on the side of the road, followed by well-meaning but ultimately ignorant and self-righteous consumers talking about how unresourceful these farmers are when they could be making pomodoro (not even kamatis or tomato, just to show how cultured they are) sauce out of it.

This was one of the things addressed in my conversation with Jomar Fleras, the executive director of Rise Against Hunger (RAS), a non-profit food bank I had featured in Agriculture magazine back when I was editor-in-chief.

"We did a survey just this year; it was done by [a highly respected third party consultancy firm], and that survey showed that 30 percent of all the vegetables brought to the trading post, or bagsakan, are actually rejected, and the farmers are throwing them along the road. They cannot dispose of them there since they have to pay a disposal fee, which is going to cost them. The farmers

are suffering," he said. "It is very ironic because the producers of food are the ones who are very hungry."

We were talking about food waste and how it can be circumvented to feed hungry Filipinos, particularly children, and how addressing child hunger can lead to better citizenry. "Globally, food loss is about 30 percent, which is enough to feed all the hungry people. When it comes to policy-making, the government should already have enacted a Food Act bill, which states that all companies should not dispose of their valuable food and donate it to food banks for distribution to people who are hungry," he said. "This is a bill that does not need a budget because you are looking at what is already available and distributing it. Why would you feed landfills when you can feed people? And when you feed landfills, you contribute 10 percent to greenhouse gas emission."

RAS is trying to address this. It set up



AVANT GARDENER

YVETTE TAN

a food bank in the Nueva Vizcaya Agriculture Terminal (NVAT) where vendors can trade their excess vegetables for items that have been donated to RAS like "canned goods, toothbrushes and toothpaste, water, and other things" instead of throwing them away. The vegetables, which are still perfectly edible, "will be given to schools in Nueva Vizcaya" where RAS has programs that feed "about 25,000 people, both students and families."

Fleras also talked about using unused space to plant vegetables, another project RAS is working on. "There is a lot of new real estate in business districts or business areas. The tops of their buildings can be used to plant vegetables using hydroponic systems. We have... partnered with [a company] to convert building rooftops into hydroponic farms. We will be planting high-yielding vegetables for salad and selling them to restaurants. We have a lot of buyers already. The proceeds from that will go to Rise Against Hunger, and we will use them to feed children," he said.

Some people will ask, "why not just use hydroponics to plant vegetables to feed to the children instead of going through the circuitous route of selling them?" (because we all know that this is something people will ask)" to which Fleras has a good answer that isn't apparent to people who aren't immersed in the fields of agriculture and social work: "It is very difficult to grow pinakbet vegetables through hydroponic farming, so we will plant high yield vegetables to make it profitable. We cannot use salad

vegetables like lettuce to feed the children because they will not eat them."

Part of a well-run feeding program isn't just making sure that the recipients have enough nutrients. It also takes into account taste and culture, among many other factors. Are these dishes delicious and are they culturally appropriate?

There's also the fact that it takes less resources to transport goods to far places, such as from a building rooftop in Manila to a school in Nueva Vizcaya (not to mention ridiculous in this specific scenario), so selling vegetables to nearby buyers and using the profits to feed children makes a lot of sense. "We [will] sell [the harvested vegetables] to buyers in the area, and at the same time, we are cutting down on our carbon footprint. In the business area, there are a lot of restaurants; you just need to go down in the building and sell it to the restaurants. Lesser carbon footprint, lesser environmental impact, and the revenue we get will help us buy food for the kids," Fleras said.

A lot of people like to comment on Facebook about systems they know nothing about. Instead of lecturing farmers about not throwing away tomatoes, these commenters should put their money where their mouths are and move away from their keyboards and into actually supporting our farmers through buying local, pressuring government officials for a better food system, or supporting organizations like RAS that includes agriculture in their overall plan for a food secure future.



BSP keeps rates steady

By LAWRENCE AGCAOILI

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) maintained a hawkish pause as it kept interest rates unchanged with risks to inflation outlook remaining tilted substantially to the upside.

In a press briefing, BSP Governor Eli Remolona Jr. said the Monetary Board decided to keep the central bank's target reverse repurchase rate (RRR) steady at 6.50 percent, the highest since the 7.50 percent recorded in May 2007.

Likewise, he said the interest rates on the overnight deposit and lending facilities will remain at six percent and seven percent, respectively.

The BSP chief pointed out that the balance of risks to the inflation outlook still leans significantly toward the upside.

"Key upside risks are associated with potential pressures emanating from higher transport charges, increased electricity rates and higher oil prices. Meanwhile, the impact of a relatively weak global recovery as well as government measures to mitigate the effects of El Niño weather conditions could reduce the central forecast," Remolona said.

He added that overall outlook for inflation remains largely unchanged.

"With the sum of recent information, the Monetary Board continues to see the need to keep monetary policy settings sufficiently tight to allow inflation expectations to settle more firmly within the target range," Remolona said.

The BSP has raised interest rates by a cumulative 450 basis points since May last year to tame inflation and stabilize the peso. This year alone, the central bank hiked key policy rates by 100 basis points.

He said that previous adjustments have continued to work their way through the economy, as seen from the declining path of core inflation.

Headline inflation averaged 6.2 percent from January to November, still above the BSP's two to four percent target, despite easing sharply to 4.1 percent in November from 4.9 percent in October.

Likewise, core inflation, which strips the volatile oil and food prices, averaged 6.8 percent during the 11-month period after easing to 4.7 percent in November from 5.3 percent in October.

"In the coming quarters, the national government's non-monetary interventions will remain crucial to sustain the disinflation process. Going forward, the BSP remains ready to adjust monetary policy settings as necessary, in line with its mandate to ensure price stability," the BSP chief said.

Remolona said the country's medium-term growth prospects remain firm, with strong demand expected in the fourth quarter due to sustained consumer spending and improved labor market conditions.

"The BSP will also continue to monitor how firms and households are responding to tighter monetary policy conditions alongside evolving domestic and external economic conditions," he said.

BSP Assistant Governor Illuminada Sicat said the latest risk-adjusted infla-

tion forecast for 2024 has declined to 4.2 percent from 4.4 percent in the previous meeting in November.

For 2025, Sicat said the risk-adjusted inflation forecast is unchanged at 3.4 percent.

Sicat said headline inflation may decline to within the two to four percent target range in the first quarter before climbing above the target in the second quarter of next year.

She said inflation expectations based on the survey of economists from Dec. 5 to 10 also showed a lower mean inflation forecast of six percent versus the previous results of 6.1 percent.

Likewise, she said inflation expectations also declined to 3.9 percent from four percent for 2024, but increased to 3.5 percent from 3.4 percent for 2025.

"As the governor has repeated many times, we need some firmer indications that inflation expectations are already anchored firmly within the target range and actual inflation has reverted back within the target path. So we must see that there are firm indications towards that trend," Sicat said.

Remolona said the BSP's latest survey of external forecasters shows that inflation expectations have been broadly anchored, with a mean forecast that is within range for both 2024 and 2025.

ING Bank senior economist Nicholas Mapa said the central bank reiterated that risks to inflation outlook remained tilted substantially to the upside.

"With inflation headed lower and the Fed (US Federal Reserve) dovish, more signs point to BSP being done with rate hikes," Mapa said.

The US Fed decided to keep interest rates on hold also in its meeting.



Wholesale price growth steady at 4.4% in Oct

By **LOUELLA DESIDERIO**

Wholesale prices of goods in October grew at the same pace as the previous month, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

PSA data showed the General Wholesale Price Index (GWPI) growth was unchanged at 4.4 percent in October from the previous month.

The GWPI growth in October, however, is lower than the 7.6 percent uptick posted in the same month last year.

From January to October, GWPI growth averaged 5.1 percent.

The PSA said three commodity groups registered higher increases in October from the previous month, such as beverages and tobacco at six percent from 5.9 percent; chemicals, including animal and vegetable oils and fats, at 1.8 percent from 1.3 percent; and machinery and transport equipment at 1.5 percent from 1.4 percent.

Meanwhile, those with slower declines in October from the previous month are crude materials, inedible except fuels (-3.5 percent from -5.3) and mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials (-3.7 percent from -4.7 percent).

Those which registered slower increases in October compared to September are food (seven from 7.3 percent) and manufactured goods classified chiefly by materials (4.6 percent from 4.7 percent).

Miscellaneous manufactured articles retained its

September growth rate of 3.6 percent in October.

In Luzon, the GWPI growth slowed down to 4.4 percent in October from the previous month's 4.6 percent.

"The downtrend of the GWPI in Luzon was primarily caused by the slower annual increase in the heavily weighted food index at 6.8 percent in October from 7.3 percent in September," the PSA said.

Also contributing to the lower GWPI growth in Luzon was the manufactured goods classified chiefly by materials commodity group as it posted slower growth of 4.9 percent in October from 5.1 percent a month ago.

In the Visayas, the GWPI posted a faster growth rate of 5.3 percent in October from 4.6 percent in September.

"The higher annual growth of food index at 11.2 percent during the month from 9.1 percent in the previous month primarily caused the uptrend in the annual rate of GWPI in Visayas," the PSA said.

In addition, it said beverages and tobacco had a higher increase of 10.6 percent in October from 10.5 percent in September.

Mindanao had a slightly higher GWPI growth rate of 3.3 percent in October from 3.2 percent in September.

"The uptrend of the GWPI in Mindanao was primarily brought about by the higher annual increment of food index at 6.6 percent in October 2023 from 5.8 percent in the previous month," the PSA said.



NEDA endorses lower tariff extension

By LOUELLA DESIDERIO

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board yesterday endorsed extending the implementation of lowered tariffs on key commodities like rice, corn and pork until the end of next year to ensure sufficient supply and stable prices.

"The Board endorsed the proposed Executive Order (EO) to extend the reduced Most Favored Nation or MFN tariff rates on selected commodities covered under Executive Order No. 10, series of 2022, including pork, corn and rice, until Dec. 31, 2024," NEDA Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said at a briefing at Malacañang yesterday.

Under the proposed EO, reduced tariffs tariff rates for pork will remain at 15 percent in-quota and 25 percent out-quota; corn at five percent in-quota and 15 percent out-quota and rice at 35 percent both in-quota and out-quota for the extended period.

Balisacan said the NEDA Board also approved the Committee on Tariff and Related Matters' recommendation to modify the review period for the tariff rate on coal from a semestral to an annual basis.

Tariff rates on pork, corn and rice will be reviewed on a semestral basis.

"The proposed extension of reduced tariffs will help ensure an adequate supply of agricultural commodities and maintain stable and affordable prices, thereby better managing potential inflationary pressures," Balisacan said.

The headline inflation rate eased to a 20-month low of 4.1 percent in November from 4.9 percent in October, driven mainly by slower food price increases.

In the January to November period, inflation averaged 6.2 percent and remained above the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas' two to four percent target range.

Balisacan said the extended implementation of the reduced tariffs will also encourage diversification of the country's market sources and a forward-looking trade policy to respond to possible supply and price shocks from major challenges such as African swine fever, impact of the El Niño phenomenon and rising global commodity prices.

He said the NEDA Board also approved the Dalton Pass East Alignment Road Project, the second phase of the Master Plan on High Standard Highway or HSH Network Development of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and the

8-Point Action Agenda of the Department of Health (DOH)'s Medium-Term Strategy for the Health Sector for this year until 2028.

The P67.4-billion Dalton Pass East Alignment Road Project of the DPWH will involve the construction of a 23-kilometer, four-lane alternative road to bypass the existing Dalton Pass in Central Luzon, particularly during road closures due to calamities.

It is expected to be completed by 2031.

"The project will facilitate the seamless transport of people and the delivery of essential goods and services within the region," Balisacan said.

Meanwhile, the second phase of the Master Plan on HSH Network Development aims to provide a higher quality HSH network for faster, safer, more comfortable, more reliable and environmentally friendly road transport.

Under the master plan, Balisacan said 53 Class-1 projects will be implemented in the short-term to be completed by 2030, medium-term to commence in 2030 and to be completed by 2035 and long-term to commence in 2035 and be completed by 2045.

"These projects will support connectivity for economic growth and development, efficiency in reducing traffic congestion, environmental sustainability and social acceptability," he said.

Balisacan said the 8-Point Action Agenda of the DOH contains priority strategies for the health sector.

He said the agenda is aligned with the Philippine Development Plan and the Universal Health Care Program and takes into consideration current health outcomes, lessons from the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, and the implementation of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling.

He also said updates on previously approved public-private partnership (PPP) projects were taken up.

In particular, the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital Cancer Center PPP project is now undergoing procurement.

Meanwhile, the Tarlac-Pangasinan-La Union Expressway Extension project is currently undergoing a Swiss challenge.

"The contract may be awarded in March if there is no challenger, or in May 2024 if there is a challenger," Balisacan said.

For the solicited proposal to upgrade and operate the Ninoy Aquino International Airport PPP project, the deadline for the bid submission for the project is on Dec. 27.

— With Helen Flores



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Marcos extends lower tariffs on rice, pork

THE NATIONAL Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board, chaired by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., has approved another one-year extension of the lower tariff rates on rice, pork, and corn as the country continues to battle inflation.

NEDA Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan on Thursday said the NEDA Board approved the proposed executive order (EO) to extend the reduced most favored nation tariff rates on several commodities, including rice, pork, and corn until Dec. 31, 2024.

A copy of the new EO, which will be signed by Mr. Marcos, has yet to be released as of press time.

Originally approved in 2021 by then-President Rodrigo R. Duterte, the modified rates for these commodities have been extended twice. The current order, EO 10, is set to expire on Dec. 31, 2023.

"The proposed extension of reduced tariffs will help ensure an

adequate supply of agricultural commodities and maintain stable and affordable prices, thereby better managing potential inflationary pressures," Mr. Balisacan said during a Palace briefing.

Once signed, the EO will maintain tariff rates for imports of swine meat or pork at 15% for shipments within the minimum access volume (MAV) quota and 25% for those exceeding the quota.

The tariff rates for corn will be kept at 5% (within the MAV quota) and 15% (exceeding the MAV quota).

Tariff rates for imports of rice will remain at 35% for both in-quota and out-quota.

"The tariffs while reduced are still high so it doesn't really reduce the protection on our farmers," the NEDA chief said.

Mr. Balisacan said the lower tariff rates on pork, corn, and rice will be reviewed every six months.

Tariffs, S1/5

Tariffs, from S1/1

Inflation averaged 6.2% in the January-to-November period amid rising prices of food and fuel. The BSP expects inflation to average 6% this year and 3.7% in 2024.

Rice prices have been volatile this year. In September, rice inflation surged to 17.9%, the highest print since March 2009, prompting the government to impose a price ceiling for one month.

"We will also be able to encourage alternative supply to diversify the country's market sources and establish a forward-looking trade policy that will allow effective and timely response for possible supply and price shocks brought about by major challenges such as the worsening African Swine Fever, anticipated impact of the El Niño phenomenon and continuous increases in commodity prices in the world market," Mr. Balisacan said.

He said the NEDA Board also approved the Committee on Tariff and Related Matters' recommendation to review the tariff rate on coal on an annual basis, instead of every six months.

EO 10 had stated that the zero duty on coal would be applied beyond Dec. 31, 2023.

"Extending reduced tariff will further discourage pro-

duction which goes against the promise and objective of President Marcos,"

Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. President Danilo V. Fausto said in a Viber message.

The Federation of Free Farmers opposed the extension of the reduced tariffs, saying Mr. Marcos had been poorly advised.

— Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza

FULL STORY



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British chamber backs law vs agri smuggling, 5-year EO 10 effectivity

THE British Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines (BCCP) said it supports the passage of the proposed Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act and the extension of Executive Order (EO) No. 10's validity until 2028.

At a briefing on Thursday, BCCP Executive Director Chris Nelson presented the foreign chamber's wish list for the Philippines next year.

EO 10, which reduced the Most Favored Nation tariff rates on pork, corn, rice, and coal as an anti-inflation measure, was due to expire at the end of the year. The Palace on Thursday announced the extension of the EO's validity for a further year beyond Dec. 31.

"Obviously, we would have preferred it to be extended for the period of his (President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.) presidency because it is an EO. But realistically, we understand that it's going to be extended for (just) one year," Mr. Nelson said.

"What we have tried to emphasize is that we as a chamber and the companies we bring in, try to make this a long-term relationship ... so I think we would like it for a longer period. But... we understand that it may only be for another year," he said.

The President had signed the EO on Dec. 10.

Under the EO, tariff rates for imports of pork were kept at 15% for shipments within the minimum access volume (MAV) quota and 25% for those exceeding the quota.

Meanwhile, the corresponding rates for corn remained at 5% for shipments within the MAV quota and 15% for those exceeding the quota. The rice tariff was set at a uniform 35% for all grain regardless of source. The previous 35% rate had applied originally to Southeast Asian rice. The EO retained the zero rate on imports of coal.

Mr. Nelson said that the importance of agriculture has been a key focus worldwide.

"One of the major impacts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is on grain. Ukraine is one of the largest producers of grain in Europe. (The war) obviously had an impact and caused distortions in supply," he said.

"I raise this point as if you look at agriculture, costs have a key impact on the consumer sector... I think what we can do is to supply pork, which will help in terms of the supply side, and then the security and inflation are going to be very important factors," he added.

He said that it is the reason behind BCCP support for the proposed Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act.

"Significant progress has been made. The House has passed its version, and the Senate has just passed (its measure) on third reading. As you will know, under your system, those two bills must be reconciled in bicameral session," Mr. Nelson said.

He said that the chamber has consistently supported the passage of the measure to help with inflation, food security, food supply, the resiliency of Philippine agriculture, and the promotion of fair trade practices. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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ABACA FARMERS SA CATANDUANES TULUNGAN

PAHIRAPAN ang buhay ngayon ng ilang libong naghahabi ng Abaca mula sa halos lahat ng bayan ng Catanduanes dahil sa walang tigil na pagbuhos ng ulan dulot ng shear lines at low pressure area na pumasok sa Kabikolan tuwing sumasapit ang buwan ng Setyembre hanggang Disyembre.

Minsan na natin binisita ang mga nagtatanim ng Abaca sa lalawigan ito noong nakaraang linggo upang tingnan ang kanilang kalagayan at bigyan ng pagkain sa pamamagitan ng Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Dalawang uri ng kabuhatan lang ang pinagkakakitaan ng mga tagaritong mistulang mga basang sisiw sila na walang makain kapag ganitong mga panahon na walang puknat na dumarating ang sama ng panahon.

Hindi na nga sila makapagbilad ng abaka dahil bihirang sumikat ang araw, hindi pa makapangisda bunsod sa mala-gusaling naglalakihang alon na delikado naman sa mga mangingisdang dumarayo pa sa karagatan ng Pasipiko.

Ang masaklap pa, binabarat ng mga buwayang negosyante ang pamimili ng hinabing abaka sa mga pobrang magsasakang 'yun na lang ang tanging inaasahan upang pantawid gutom sa kanilang pamilya.

Ibig sabihin, ang burgis na mga



exporter lang nito ang yumayaman samantalang dilat sa gutom ang mga tagaritong matagal na panahon nang pinagtitiyagaan ang pagtatanim nitong umaasang guminhawa ang kanilang buhay.

Kung titingnan kasi, ang Food Security na programa ng gobyerno ay nakatuon lang sa mga nagtatanim ng palay at ibang high value crops subalit hindi kaakibat ang pagpapalakas din ng pinagkakakitaan ng abaca farmers na simbolo ng hanapbuhay sa Bikol.



GO: SMALL SCALE FARMERS, HIGIT NA DAPAT TULUNGAN NG GOBYERNO

MATAPOS dumalo sa groundbreaking ng Super Health Center sa Bansud, Oriental Mindoro, binigyang-diin ni Senador Christopher "Bong" Go ang pangangailangan ng dagdag na suporta ng gobyerno para sa maliliit na magsasaka at mangingisda sa bansa.

Ang panawagang ito ng senador ay alinsunod sa pagsisikap niya na maibsan ang mga hamon na kinahaharap ng sektor ng agrikultura.

Binigyang-diin ni Go ang makabuluhang progreso sa pagsasabatas ng Republic Act No. 11953 o ang New Agrarian Emancipation Act.

"Last July 7, pinirmahan po ni Pangulong (Ferdinand) Bongbong Marcos ang Republic Act No. 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act," pahayag ni Go, miyembro ng Committee on Agriculture at co-sponsor at co-author ng nasabing batas.

"Layunin nitong mapagaan ang bigat na dinadala ng ating

agrarian reform beneficiaries dahil sa kanilang mga utang," paliwanag ni Go.

Isinasantabi ng batas ang lahat ng pantang ng agrarian reform beneficiaries, kabilang ang interes, multa, at surcharge. Bago ang pagsasabatas nito, umabot sa 610,054 ARBs ang may utang sa Land Bank of the Philippines ng kabuuang P57.56 bilyon. Saklaw nito ang 1,173,101.575 ektarya ng mga lupain sa repormang agraryo.

"Dahil dito na-wipe out po ang kanilang utang, mas makapokus na po sila sa kanilang pagsasaka."

Bukod dito, naniniwala si Go na dapat pang suportahan ng

gobyerno ang mga magsasaka at tiyaking sila ay kumikita sa kanilang pagsusumikap.

"Kung mayroon pong dapat na maging masaya ay ang ating mga magsasaka. Dapat kumita sila sa kanilang pagsasaka," ani Go.

Nangako si Go na ipagpapatuloy ang pagtataguyod ng mga batas at mga hakbang na susuporta sa maliliit na magsasaka.

Sinabi niya na ang sama-samang pagsisikap ay dapat gawin ng pamahalaan at stakeholder upang ang maliliit na magsasaka ay makatanggap ng suporta at pagkilala sa kanilang kontribusyon sa seguridad at ekonomiya ng bansa.

Bukod sa RA 11953, isa si Go sa may-akda ng Republic Act 11901, o ang Agriculture, Fisheries, and Rural Development Financing Enhancement Act of 2022, na nagpahusay sa istrukturang pinansyal sa agrikultura, pangisdaan, at pag-unlad sa kanayunan.

Naghain din ang senador ng SBN 2117, na naglalayong magbigay ng full crop insurance coverage sa agrarian reform beneficiaries, gayundin ang SBN 2118, na magbibigay ng mas magandang insurance coverage at serbisyo sa mga magsasaka at makatulong sa pag-iwas sa epekto ng natural na kalamidad sa sektor ng agrikultura. **RNT**



NEDA: Tapyas-taripa sa imported pork, bigas palawigin

Inendorso na kay Pangulong Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos ang pagpapalawig pa ng mas mababang taripa sa imported pork, bigas at gayundin sa mais hanggang sa Disyembre 31, 2024.

Ayon kay National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio Balisacan, inendorso ng NEDA Board ang isang executive order na magpapalawig sa EO No. 10 series of 2022 na nagbagsak ng taripa ng baboy sa 15% para sa iaangkat sa ilalim ng tinatawag na minimum access volume (MAV) at 25% para sa importation sa labas ng MAV. Para sa mais, ang

taripa naman ay 5% para sa importation na sakop ng MAV o ang tinatawag na in quota rate, at 15% ang out quota rate. Sa bigas, pananatilihin naman sa 35% ang taripa na pareho lamang para sa in quota at out quota rate.

Sabi ni Balisacan, inaprubahan din ng NEDA Board ang rekomendasyon ng Committee on Tariff and Related Matters na repasuhin ang taripa kada anim na buwan.

Ang pagpapalawig ng mas mababang taripa sa baboy, bigas, at mais ang magtitiyak umano na mayroong sapat na suplay nito sa bansa.

Paliwanag ni Bali-

sacan, nand'yan pa rin ang mga problema tulad ng patuloy na pagkalat ng African Swine Fever na banta sa suplay at presyo ng baboy. Inasahan din aniya na magkakaroon ng shortage sa mais at bigas kaya kailangang punan ng mga imported ang kakulangan sa lokal na produksiyon.

Sabi pa ni Balisacan, mataas pa rin ang presyo ng mga bilhin at tumataas din ang inflation sa bigas. Sa pandaigdigang merkado, tumataas din ang presyo ng bigas kaya kailangang panatilihin ang mababang taripa para hindi lalong sumirit ang presyo nito. (Eileen Mencias)



Bong Go seeks more gov't support for small-scale farmers

AFTER attending the groundbreaking of a Super Health Center in Bansud, Oriental Mindoro, Senator Christopher "Bong" Go emphasized the need for increased government support for the country's small-scale farmers and fisherfolks.

This call for action is in line with the senator's efforts to alleviate the challenges faced by the agricultural sector.

Go highlighted the significant legislative progress made with the enactment of Republic Act No. 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act.

"Last July 7, pinirmahan po ni Pangulong (Ferdinand) Bongbong Marcos ang Republic Act No. 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act," stated Go who is a member of the Committee on Agriculture and a co-sponsor and co-author of the measure.

"Layunin nitong mapagaan ang bigat na dinadala po ng ating mga agrarian reform beneficiaries dahil sa kanilang mga utang," Go explained.

The law condones all loans incurred by agrarian reform bene-

ficiaries (ARBs), including interests, penalties, and surcharges. Prior to its enactment, up to 610,054 ARBs owe the Land Bank of the Philippines a total of P57.56 billion in loans. This covers 1,173,101.575 hectares of agrarian reform lands.

Go emphasized the positive impact of this debt relief, stating, "Dahil dito na-wipe out po ang kanilang utang, mas makakapokus na po sila sa kanilang pagsasaka."

Moreover, Go firmly believes that the government should further support these farmers, ensuring that they profit from their hard work.

"Dapat po ay suportahan ng ating gobyerno ang ating mga magsasaka. Kung mayroon pong dapat na maging masaya, ay ang ating mga farmers. Dapat kumita sila sa kanilang pagsasaka," he added.

Go then vowed to continue advocating for legislation and initiatives that supports small-scale farmers.

Go said that a concerted effort must be made by the govern-

ment in coordination with other stakeholders so that small-scale farmers receive the necessary support and recognition for their contribution to the nation's food security and economy.

Aside from RA 11953, Go was one of the authors of Republic Act 11901, or the Agriculture, Fisheries, and Rural Development Financing Enhancement Act of 2022, which enhanced the financial structure supporting agriculture, fisheries, and rural development. This law is designed to offer improved access to credit for rural communities, particularly benefiting farmers, fisherfolk, and agribased workers. The goal is to elevate their well-being, competitiveness, and productivity.

The senator also filed SBN 2117, which aims to provide full crop insurance coverage for agrarian reform beneficiaries, as well as SBN 2118, which aims to provide better insurance coverage and services to farmers and help mitigate the impact of natural disasters on the agricultural sector, if enacted into laws.



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Soybeans steady; wheat jumps

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybeans were largely unchanged on Thursday after a two-day slide, as expectations of rains in Brazil's parched oilseed producing regions continued to pressure prices.

Wheat jumped 0.7 percent, while corn futures gained ground.

"Soybeans are being driven by Brazilian weather forecasts which are showing some rains next week," said one Singapore-based trader. "The wheat market is just recovering from last session's losses as there is some buying

interest at these levels."

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) fell half a cent to \$13.07 a bushel. Wheat rose 0.7 percent to \$6.09-3/4 a bushel and corn gained 0.4 percent at \$4.81-1/2 a bushel.

The soybean market is closely watching the weather in Brazil, where forecasts showed much-needed rains in the week ahead in central and northern parts of the country, after hot, dry conditions caused concern, analysts said.

Reuters