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EDITORIAL

Unscrupulous traders

Amid complaints of highland farmers about a flood of smuggled agricultural commodities during the holidays, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has formed a committee that will blacklist unscrupulous traders who violate Republic Act 9184, the Government Procurement Reform Act of 2002.

Covered by Laurel's order are "manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, contractors and consultants" in the agriculture sector. The committee will assess complaints initiated by the bids and awards committee of the Department of Agriculture.

The committee is being organized as lawmakers ask why the Bureau of Plant Industry has failed to blacklist importers allegedly involved in hoarding and manipulation of agricultural products.

Whether the committee can effectively carry out its mandate remains to be seen. Proving hoarding and manipulation of supply and prices of agricultural commodities has always been a challenge in this country. In 2022 amid sky-high prices of refined white sugar, several warehouses found to be storing the product were padlocked. The owners, however, pointed out that it was normal business practice to release their stocks in batches over a certain period instead of releasing their inventory all at the same time. They noted that as in other commodities, there is also speculative trading in agricultural products. Businessmen project supply and price trends and make their purchases and sales accordingly.

Last year as rice prices surged,

several warehouses were raided. How many of the owners were actually indicted for price and supply manipulation or cartel-type operations? The government has been talking about a rice cartel for many years now and, last year, an onion cartel. How many have actually been prosecuted for such unscrupulous trading?

Still, any effort to crack down on unscrupulous agriculture traders is a positive development. It should be properly coordinated with state prosecutors so that charges against accused offenders will stick. And it should be complemented by an intensified effort to crack down on agricultural smuggling.

It was a sad Christmas for farmers in the Cordilleras who were forced to dump or virtually give away for free their crops including tomatoes, carrots and cabbage because of a supply glut that they attributed to a flood of imports. The dirt-cheap prices at the farm gate, however, did not translate into dirt-cheap retail prices in Metro Manila and other places far from the Cordilleras.

Benguet farmers are bewailing that their carrots, cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower are rotting due to a lack of buyers. Sugarcane producers have also pointed out that sugar retail prices remain high despite multiple importations and a significant drop in mill gate prices. If this situation continues, agriculture will no longer be viable and the sector will be even less productive than it already is. The unscrupulous traders behind this situation are a threat to national food security and must be identified and prosecuted.



DA to unveil agri modernization strategy

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The government is set to unveil this week its strategy to modernize agriculture and boost the farm sector's production capacity, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the game plan aims to increase the contribution of the agriculture sector to the domestic economy, particularly by improving the lives of farmers and fisherfolk and creating more jobs.

Speaking at the agency's weekly flag ceremony, Laurel rallied the DA employees to focus on the challenge of producing more food for Filipinos even as the country faces a prolonged dry spell in the first part of the year.

"2024 is a new year and it will be a very challenging year. As I told you last time, all eyes are trained on us, more on me probably because I'm the new agriculture secretary," Laurel said.

"The entire country expects that we could feed them and that we will try to bring commodity prices down," he said.

Laurel also emphasized the need for more timely farm and market statistics, adaption of new technologies, and farm mechanization.

"Very soon, we will have that program – possibly in the next 10 days," he said.

Laurel reminded the DA employees to work with urgency given the challenges faced by the sector, including this year's El Nino episode, and the time left in President Marcos' single six-year term.

"Basically, a lot of things need to be done. We need to do this with a sense of urgency because there are only four years left in the administration of President Marcos. And we also have to change the

perception of Filipinos, that we can produce more food for our country," he said.

By producing more locally, the DA said the Philippines could dramatically narrow its agricultural trade deficit which registered at around P660 billion, or four times the budget of the DA in 2024.

It stressed that money paid for by consumers for imported agricultural commodities could go instead to the pockets of farmers and fisherfolk, and fuel investment in the agriculture sector that employs four in every 10 Filipinos.

Moreover, Laurel called on DA employees to stay focused on the goal of modernizing the country's agriculture

sector to achieve food security and lessen agricultural imports.

"We can do this. But I need your help, I need your full cooperation for the DA to achieve its goals," he said.

Since taking the helm of the agriculture portfolio in November, Laurel has visited various DA offices around the country.

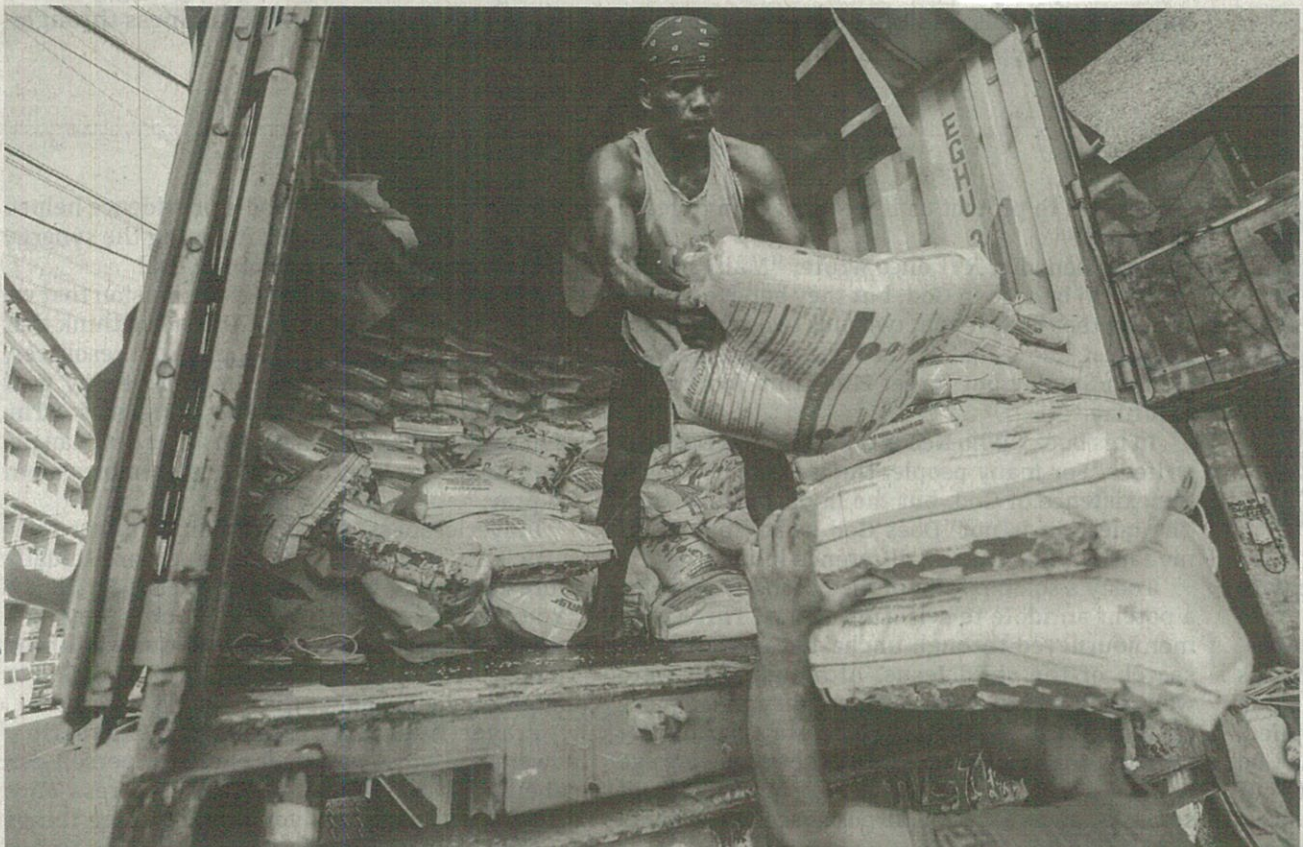
He broke ground and inaugurated new irrigation and other facilities, and consulted local officials, farmers, fisherfolk and other agriculture stakeholders to determine a better course of action and gather support to achieve President Marcos' vision of a modern farm sector and better lives for farmers and fishermen.

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IMPORTED RICE — Laborers unload sacks of imported rice in a retailer's store in Davao City on Friday, Jan. 5, 2024. The Department of Agriculture said that about 500,000 metric tons of rice are expected to arrive in the country until February as the government boosts the staple in preparation for the adverse effects of the El Niño phenomenon. (Keith Bacongco)



Public to feel slight hike in rice prices amid lean season - DA

By ROMINA CABRERA

The public may feel a slight increase in rice prices amid the lean season, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA), but the agency assured that prices would not hit P60 per kilo.

DA spokesman Arnel de Mesa said the prevailing prices in the market for regular-milled rice is around P52 per kilo, almost the same as those for well-milled rice.

De Mesa added that the government is taking action to reel in the price of the staple commodity,

including allowing more imports like those from India.

"For now, we're still far from the P52 going to P60 per kilo. We're still not seeing prices hitting P60. It's just a short season, anyway. What's important is that imported rice will arrive, especially completing those from India," he said in Filipino over radio dzBB.

The DA official noted that rice prices historically rise around mid-January to mid-February after the end of the wet season, as well as mid-August to mid-September.

"During these periods, we feel

that rice prices increase little by little," he said.

De Mesa said the DA is studying the possible imposition of a suggested retail price (SRP) for rice that is based on the Price Act, but this is still in the early stages.

He added there are still long consultations ahead with various stakeholders, including consumers, farmers, traders and millers.

"This is to compare, to see what the price range will be... It's hard to say a specific price; it depends on the consultation," the DA spokesman said.



HSBC lowers inflation forecast this year to 3.5%

By **LAWRENCE AGCAOILI**

British banking giant HSBC has adjusted its forecast for headline inflation in the Philippines for the year, lowering it to 3.5 percent from the earlier projection of 4.1 percent.

HSBC economist for ASEAN Aris Dacanay said two policies that occurred in late December had substantially altered the inflation outlook for 2024.

These include the rollover of Executive Order 10 via EO 50 that temporarily reduced the tariff rates on rice, pork, coal and corn imports until the end of 2024 to keep inflation at bay and the quick importation of rice to bolster supply.

"As a result, we lower our full-year headline CPI (consumer price index) forecast for 2024 to 3.5 percent, which means we now expect inflation to average within the central bank's two to four percent target band, giving monetary authorities room to maneuver policy," Dacanay said.

Inflation accelerated to six percent last year after quickening to 5.8 percent in 2022 from 3.9 percent in 2021 due to soaring oil and food prices. The CPI has breached the two to four percent target range of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipi-

nas (BSP) for two consecutive years.

Without the extension of the EO, Dacanay said inflation would have jumped by 1.4 percentage points as early as the first quarter of this year.

"But keep in mind that we are not shaving 1.4 percentage point off in our new forecast. This is because a resurgence in global rice prices was seen in the last week of December," he added.

Due to lingering El Niño risks to the global supply of rice, Dacanay pointed out that export prices have increased to \$659 per metric ton.

"Not only is this the highest since 2008, but we have yet to see global rice prices peak. And with rice being a heavy component of the Philippines' CPI basket, elevated export prices will likely put a floor under how much inflation can moderate," he warned.

According to Dacanay, the good news is the administration was quick on its feet in making sure there is ample rice supply in the economy to prevent prices from shooting up even further.

For one, the Department of Agriculture has allowed the importation of one mil-

lion metric tons of rice, half of which is expected to arrive before the harvest season starts in March.

Despite inflation being relatively more benign, but with policy rate differentials still playing a crucial role, Dacanay said that HSBC anticipates the BSP's Monetary Board to implement rate cuts in line with the US Federal Reserve, starting in the second quarter of this year instead of the initially projected third quarter.

"We then expect the BSP to clock a similar pace as the Fed by cutting its policy rate by 25 basis points (bps) in each quarter until the benchmark rate reaches five percent in 3Q 2025," he said.

The BSP raised key policy rates by 450 bps since May 2022, to tame inflation that has breached the target for 20 straight months or since hitting 4.9 percent in April 2022, as well as to stabilize the peso that slumped to a record low of 59 to \$1 in October 2022.

"All in all, the BSP now has more room to maneuver its monetary stance with downside risks to inflation materializing. Instead, the main concern moving forward will likely focus on the gap

between the Fed and the BSP rates. We expect the Fed to begin its easing cycle by June 2024 and there will likely be some volatility in the peso if the BSP cuts ahead of the Fed, considering the Philippine economy's still wide current account deficit," he said.

Dacanay also sees the BSP further lowering the reserve requirement ratio or the level of deposits banks are required to keep with the central bank in the second quarter of this year.

"We argued beforehand that a cut in the RRR does not constitute a change in the BSP's monetary stance since the excess liquidity it will generate will only be mopped up by the BSP's wide array of monetary instruments. Nonetheless, cutting the RRR may give the market a wrong signal that the BSP has turned dovish, a risk the BSP Governor was mindful of when he stated that the RRR cut will happen when the time is right," Dacanay said.

For 2025, HSBC raised its inflation forecast to 3.8 percent from 3.6 percent, citing potential upside risks such as the impact of the El Niño dry spell and persistently high rice prices.

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BUT REPEAT OF PRICE CAPS RULED OUT

DA EYES SRP ON RICE AS RETAIL PRICES STILL OVER P50/KILO

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

The **Department of Agriculture (DA)** is looking at the possibility of issuing a suggested retail price (SRP) for rice in an effort to temper price fluctuations across the country.

But with global rice prices surging to 15-year highs in late December last year to around \$620 a metric ton from \$400 in January, mainly due to poor harvests and export controls, the DA concedes that local selling prices will not be going down significantly anytime soon.

As of Friday, local regular milled rice is selling for at least P50 a kilogram, 47 percent more

than the low of P34 seen in the same period last year, based on the DA's price monitoring of Metro Manila markets.

Well-milled rice, on the other hand, retailed from P40 to P55 per kilo against last year's P38 to P44 per kilo.

Imported regular milled rice is not available but imported well-milled rice is sold from P51 to P58 per kilo, a big jump from P40 to P44 per kilo this time last year.

Guide if overcharged

Under the Price Act, or Republic Act No. 7581, suggested retail prices may be issued for basic necessities and prime commodities for the information and guidance of producers,

manufacturers, traders, dealers, sellers, retailers and consumers.

Vendors, however, are not mandated to follow the price guide and may charge more or less than the suggested prices. But the price guide helps guide consumers on how much a product is valued, thus will know if they are being overcharged.

No more price ceiling

In a radio interview on dzBB, DA spokesperson Arnel de Mesa said the DA's Agribusiness and Marketing Assistance Service would first consult with stakeholders before deciding on whether it would go ahead with the plan to have an SRP on rice.

But he already closed the

door on the possibility of the DA imposing a price ceiling for regular and well-milled rice, which President Marcos ordered in August last year to rein in runaway prices of rice.

Reservations

From Sept. 5 to October last year, the government imposed a price ceiling of P41 a kg on regular milled rice and P45 a kg on well-milled rice.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF), for its part, was initially open to having an SRP on rice, but FFF national manager Raul Montemayor said it would likely be difficult to implement, thus would not achieve the objective of controlling price spikes.

"There are many varieties and quality specifications of rice with different prices. So it would be difficult to determine an SRP for each type. And if the SRP is only for specific types like regular milled rice or well-milled rice, there will be a tendency for retailers to misdeclare rice as other types not be covered by SRPs," Montemayor explained.

The Philippines is vulnerable to fluctuations in the global prices of rice as it is one of the world's largest importers of the staple.

It has long relied on imports as local production can only cover about 90 percent of the country's needs. The balance is brought in from abroad, mainly from neighboring Thailand and Vietnam.

The country with a population of about 100 million consumes about 36,000 MT of rice a day, or about 1.08 million MT a month.

Counting on imports

As of Dec. 28 last year, the Philippines imported 3.5 million MT of rice, according to data from the Bureau of Plant Industry.

To stabilize supply and prices, De Mesa said the DA was counting on imported rice entering the country once more before the harvest season begins.

"We need to maintain at least 60 days worth of buffer stock so we are assured of ample supply. Naturally, this is where imports come in, that's what we want to happen," he said. **INQ**



AGRI IKAKASA SRP SA BIGAS

BUNSOD ng pagsipa sa presyo ng bigas noong Disyembre, ikinokonsidera ng Department of Agriculture (DA) na magpairal ng mga suggested retail price (SRP) sa mga rice product.

Ipinaliwanag ni DA spokesperson Asec. Arnel de Mesa na makakatulong ang SRP upang manatiling abot-kaya ang presyo ng bigas sa mga consumer.

Sa ngayon aniya, nagsasagawa na sila ng konsultasyon sa mga industry player at stakeholder.

"Hindi ka puwede basta mag-issue ng SRP without doing the consultations with all the stakeholders, from the consumer groups, producer groups, ganoon din sa traders and millers, lahat sila ay dapat nakokonsulta sa pagtatakda ng suggested retail price (SRP)," paglalahad ni De Mesa sa interview ng DZBB.

"Kailangan nating tignan 'yong composition sa producers group, paano na produce 'yung palay hanggang sa magiging bigas. And then, on the traders side, ano mga gastusin nila sa warehousing, sa milling, sa drying. Sa retailers naman, magkano 'yong kanilang mga gastusin din po, at maikumpara, at sa ganoong paraan, makikita po ang magiging gains ng [suggested retail price]," dagdag ng opisyal.

Nitong Biyernes, kinumpirma ng Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) na

ang rice inflation ay tumaas sa pinakamabilis na rate sa loob ng 14 taon nitong Disyembre.

Ayon sa datos ng PSA, ang average national price ng regular milled rice noong Disyembre ay P48.50 per kilo mula sa P46.73 noong Nobyembre 2023 at mas mataas naman kung ikukumpara sa P39.63 per kilo noong Disyembre 2022.

Sa well-milled rice naman, ang presyo per kilo noong Disyembre 2023 ay P53.82, mas mataas sa P51.99 per kilo noong Nobyembre 2023. Tumaas ng P10 ang bawat kilo ng bigas dahil P43.98 per kilo lamang ito noong Disyembre 2022.

Nagbabala naman ang grupo ng mga magsasaka na posibleng umabot sa P60 ang presyo ng regular milled at well-milled rice kung hindi gagawa ng kaukulang aksiyon ang gobyerno.

Sinabi ni De Mesa na bahagi ng 295,000 tonelada ng bigas mula sa India ay dumating na sa bansa.

Noong Disyembre, inihayag ng DA na ang pribadong sektor ay mag-aangkat ng 495,000 tonelada ng bigas upang madagdagan ang suplay ng bansa at matugunan ang mga pangangailangan ng populasyon hanggang sa pagsisimula ng susunod na panahon ng pag-aani sa Marso 2024. (Riz Dominguez)

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DA at BOC inutil sa vegetable smuggling

INUTIL na ang Bureau of Customs (BOC) at Department of Agriculture (DA) kontra vegetable smuggling.

Tila hindi na nagbago ang mga taga-BOC sa nakagawian nilang pamamaraang "tara system" kung saan "basta may padulas, pinalulusot".

Gayundin ang DA na itinuturong ang BOC ang may sala sa talamak na smuggling sa bansa.

Mas mainam nang sa pamamagitan ng mga multi-agency task forces sa national, maging sa provincial levels, umaksiyon ang pamahalaan upang makita mismo ang suliranin sa mga pamilihan.

Magkumahog sana ang pamahalaang itayo muli ang national task force at provincial task forces upang maglibot sa mga palengkeng binabagsakan ng mga smuggled na gulay upang sitahin, usisain at panagutin pati mga nagbebenta ng smuggled na gulay.

Tiyak sa isang linggong simultaneous operations kontra smuggled vegetables sa mga pamilihan ay mamimilit ang mga smugglers kasama ang mga kasabwat nilang



taga-BOC na nagpapakasasa sa iligal nilang gawain.

Ngunit ang pamimilit na sasapitin ng mga smugglers at mga kasabwat nila sa BOC at DA ay hindi kailanman makatutumbas ng pasakit na matagal nang nararanasan ng libu-libong vegetables farmers sa bansa, particular sa Benguet.

Sa puhunang pawis at dugo ng mga magsasaka ng gulay, napipilitan na ngang ipamigay ang kanilang mga produkto at ang iba hinahayaan na lang mabulok sa mga sakahan o tabing kalsada, dahil sa tinatamasang lugi sa pagdagsa ng smuggled vegetables.

Marahil huling hirit na ng mga magsasaka ang hiling na pagbangon muli ng anti-smuggling task forces sa national at provincial levels, bago mismong ang pamamahala ni PBBM ang ituring na inutil!

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SRP sa bigas planong ipatupad ng DA

Plano ng Department of Agriculture (DA) na magpatupad ng suggested retail prices (SRPs) sa bigas upang matiyak na may bigas na makakain ang lahat ng sambayanang Pilipino sa abot kayang presyo ng produkto.

Gayunman, sinabi ni DA Asst Secretary at spokesman Arnel de Mesa na upang maipatupad ang hakbang ay kailangan muna nilang

NI ANGIE DELA CRUZ

kumonsulta sa lahat ng mga stakeholders mula sa consumer groups, producer groups, traders at millers upang maitakda ang SRP.

Ang pahayag ay ginawa ng DA nang ianunsyo ng Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) na may pagtaas sa presyo ng bigas ng may 22.9 percent noong Disyembre 2023, ang pinaka

mabilis na pagsirit ng presyo sa nakalipas na 14 na taon.

Kailangan nating tignan 'yung composition sa producers group, paano na produce 'yung palay hanggang sa maging bigas. And then, on the traders side, ano mga gastusin nila sa warehousing, sa milling, sa drying. Sa retailers naman, magkano 'yung

kanilang mga gastusin din po, at maikumpara, at sa ganoong paraan, makikita po ang magiging gains ng SRP," pahayag ni De Mesa.

Noong Disyembre 2023, ang presyo ng well-milled rice kada kilo ay pumalo sa P53.82, mas mataas ito sa P51.99 per kilo noong November 2023 o halos mataas ng P10 kung ikukumpara sa P43.98 kada kilo ng bigas noong December 2022.



DOST AND NCMF SIGN MOA TO REINFORCE HALAL PRODUCTS' INTEGRITY

'Halal products are for everyone'

STORY & PHOTOS BY REINE JUVIERRE S. ALBERTO

'ALMOST all the products certified as halal are contaminated. That's our problem," revealed Secretary Guiling Mamondiong of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF).

Mamondiong made the statement during the signing of the memorandum of agreement between the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and NCMF on January 4 in order to reinforce the halal integrity of food and non-food products produced in the Philippines.

In the country, Islam is the second largest religion practiced by Muslims, who observe dietary laws, such as halal or foods and beverages that are lawful or permitted, and haram or not permitted.

Halal are food and non-food products that contain meat and poultry where the slaughter of animals abide by Islamic dietary laws.

It can be considered halal if the animals were slaughtered while reciting the "Bismillah" (an Arabic phrase meaning "in the name of God") and "Takbir" (Arabic term for "Allahu Akbar" meaning "Allah is the greatest"). If not, the meat is considered haram.

Other foods considered haram are pork, blood, birds of prey,

carnivorous animals, alcoholic beverages and other intoxicants.

To uphold the halal integrity of food and non-food products, the cooperation and collaboration between the two government agencies were established through the Halal Verification Laboratories (HVLs), which will determine if the products have forbidden contents, under the DOST's Regional Standards and Testing Laboratory.

The NCMF, meanwhile, will recommend and propose policies on market surveillance and the inclusion of halal testing as a requirement for halal certification and re-certification.

On verifying halal products

THERE are currently four HVLs established in the country. Two International Organization for Standardization (ISO)-certified and Philippine Accreditation Bureau (PAB)-accredited HVLs are in DOST Calabarzon and DOST Region 11 or Davao Region, which offer porcine DNA detection and ethanol, methanol



DOST and NCMF officials, led by Science Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. and NCMF Secretary Guling Mamondiong, respectively, pose for a photo after the signing of the memorandum of agreement to reinforce the halal integrity of local products through Halal Verification Laboratories.



NCMF Secretary Guling Mamondiong (second from left) receives the Halal training modules, developed by DOST Region 11 Halal Training Needs Assessment team, from Science Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. (third from left). With them are DOST Halal S&T Program Leader and DOST-11 Regional Director Anthony Sales (right) and Undersecretary for Regional Operations Sancho Mabborang (left).

and isopropanol detection.

The other two HVLs are undergoing ISO certification and PAB accreditation. They are in DOST Region 12 (porcine DNA detection) and in the Ministry of Science and Technology in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (for porcine DNA detection and free fatty acids profiling).

DOST Region 11 Regional Director Dr. Anthony Sales said during the event that through their HVLs they will make sure that the halal-certified products sold in the market do not contain haram components and have been produced using halal procedures.

"We will ensure compliance to laboratory standards and requirements for worldwide acceptance of Philippine-made halal products and services," Sales said.

Explaining how the verification process works inside the laboratory, Regional Director of DOST-Calabarzon Esmelita Bagsit said that they look into the molecular level of the porcine DNA detected

through RT-PCR to trace if there are presence of pork in products.

As for the alcohol content, they perform gas chromatography to separate and detect the chemical components of a product to determine if there is any presence of ethanol, methanol, and isopropanol.

'Halal is for everyone'

SCIENCE Secretary Dr. Renato Solidum Jr. pointed out the importance of halal testing to ensure its authenticity which goes beyond religious practices.

"Halal should not be seen only as part of a religious observation. We should view it as a way of life, a life that touches upon the inclusivity of purity, wholesomeness, and sincerity in how our Muslim brothers and sisters manage the greater Islamic economy which spans the various industry sectors," Solidum said.

Although Muslims follow the Islamic dietary laws, non-Muslims also choose halal for different reasons, such as purity and higher quality because of its certification.

Mamondiong emphasized that halal means "healthy" because of the absence of pork and alcohol in food products.

"It doesn't mean that if the product is halal it's for Muslims only. The use is not exclusively for Muslim but for everyone," he explained.

'Halal products are still limited'

VARIOUS disasters have struck Mindanao, such as floods and earthquakes among others, which affected thousands of Muslims.

Although help poured in during those times, Mamondiong said they had to reject the food packs given to them because they were not halal which defeated the purpose of extending assistance.

"We have to attend to everybody's needs in terms of emergency," he said.

The DOST-Industrial Technology Development Institute Packaging Division has developed ready-to-eat (RTE) food technologies for emergencies. Some of them can be tweaked to become halal,

Sales said.

The RTE food technologies, however, "seeks for adaptation by a private company that will adapt the technology and commercialize it to become available for emergency situations," Sales pointed out.

Sales said that currently there are no halal emergency foods available in the buffer stock of the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

He hoped for funding in their proposal to develop halal emergency foods to cater to the needs of Muslim brothers and sisters.

Solidum quipped that it is one of the challenges that they always have in DOST: scaling up the production of the technologies they have developed.

Mamondiong, meanwhile, sees production as another problem. He urged for investment in the production of halal food and non-food products to address food insufficiency and for the country to become the "halal basket of Southeast Asia."



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Gov't helps farmers scale up thru agricultural cooperatives

By JOSEPH PEDRAJAS

Small-time farmers from across the country will now have the opportunity to scale up following the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that will link agriculture cooperatives to agriculture companies.

Go Negosyo, an organization advocating for micro, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs (MSMEs), and the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) on Thursday, Jan. 4, ► **8**



BOOSTING AGRIPRENEURSHIP — Go Negosyo Founder Joey Concepcion (second from right) and Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) Chairperson Joseph B. Encabo (second from left) exchange copies of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the support for and implementation of the 'Kapatid Angat Lahat Agri Program (KALAP)' for the benefit of the cooperatives sector in the Philippines. Also shown are Go Negosyo Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar (right) and CDA Administrator Myrla B. Paradillo.

Gov't helps farmers scale up thru agricultural cooperatives 1◀

signed a deal that would create a strategic partnership supporting and implementing the objectives of the group's Kapatid Angat Lahat Agri Program (KALAP) for the benefit of the cooperatives sector in the Philippines.

KALAP was founded to establish strategic partnerships between the government and the private sector. Under the program, small farmers are going to be integrated into the value chain of big-brother companies, giving them access to mentoring, markets and capital.

The MOU, according to Go Negosyo, would improve collaboration between cooperatives and the private sector as well, and promote "a value-chain approach through public-private partnerships."

"The bottom line is poverty alleviation, and many of the poor are in the agriculture sector. Unless we fix that, we will never solve the problem of poverty," Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion said.

"There are several different inclusive business models that our big brothers in KALAP have already implemented; the cooperatives can adapt the models suited to their crop and forge a relationship with the big-brother corporations, such as helping them get access to technologies and markets," he added.

Concepcion said the partnership would help Go Negosyo identify the cooperatives that are willing to be part of KALAP.

Meanwhile, CDA Chairman Joseph B. Encabo called the signing of the MOU as "timely" as President Marcos has been spearheading efforts to strengthen Philippine cooperatives.

"As we implement the merger consolidation focusing on agriculture cooperatives, the program can directly infuse to them and roll out as they make [cooperatives] resources bigger, expand their membership, and add to their assets," he said.



SUNDAY FEATURE

Sugar mill sweetens life for community farmers

By JAMES A. LOYOLA

Gokongwei Group's Universal Robina Corporation (URC) continues to expand SONEDCO, its sugar mill in Kabankalan, Negros Occidental, even as it has evolved to become an integral part of the town's legacy and the core of the local economy.

Over 35 years, SONEDCO has grown from being just a source of a vital food product to become a tight-knit community – working, living and growing together towards a singular goal which is to improve individual lives and the entire province as a whole.

"This is an ecosystem, a community of farmers, people, business and technology. URC is not just doing business here. We are a resident of this place already," said URC Sugar and Renewables (SURE) Managing Director Renato Cabati.

Recounting his first visit to the sugar mill, URC President and CEO Irwin Lee, for his part, said, "you can feel the sense of pride, sense of legacy among the people there, the culture aspect of it and how proud they are of having been responsible for the growth and development of SONEDCO over the many decades."

URC acquired SONEDCO, then known as the Southern Negros Development Corporation, from the Montelibano family in 1989. Its core asset then was a sugar mill that could crush 4,000 tons of sugar canes per day.

Cabati said URC's late founder John Gokongwei Jr. saw the need back then for a sugar mill.

"At the time, we already had a branded foods group. It needed



JOHN GOKONGWEI JR.



IRWIN LEE

'This is an ecosystem, a community of farmers, people, business and technology.'

sugar. We were manufacturing candies, ice cream and snacks. Getting into the sugar business would support the branded food businesses, and Mr. John saw that," he said.

But "Mr. John" had his sights beyond running a sugar mill. "He had a vision of not only expanding the sugar mill but also of diversifying the sugar business," said Cabati.

SONEDCO began expanding in the mid-1990s, raising its capacity from crushing 4,000 up to 8,000 tons of sugar cane per day. Over the years, it has further raised that capacity and is currently processing up to 12,000 tons of cane per day.

Meanwhile, the expansion of its refinery stretched SONEDCO's production to 15,000 bags of refined sugar per day.

Lee said that, going forward, the general consensus is that there is still room to grow. "We talk about how big SONEDCO is and also how big it can be," he said. The goal for now is to further expand the mill's capacity from 12,000 tons to 14,000 tons of cane per day.

"I know it's a big challenge, but

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our partner farmers attain the highest productivity and highest income they can generate from their farms," he said.

"We will likewise ensure that our mills are as efficient and as productive as they can be, while investing in facilities for value-added services, such as sugar refineries, bio-mass energy production, and bio-ethanol and CO₂ production," Gokongwei added.

Increasing capacity is just one aspect of its way forward, said Cabati.

SONEDCO also upgraded its sugar mill with state-of-the-art technologies from Japan, Thailand and India to improve efficiency and energy use.

The mill began producing its own electricity after it built a biomass-fired cogeneration plant that now provides 19 megawatts to the national grid using bagasse, a byproduct of sugar milling, as fuel.

But it hasn't been just about the business of sugar, fuel, or alcohol production. SONEDCO's mill has evolved to become a fulcrum of life among the communities surrounding it.

we hope that with all the resources and support URC is giving, SONEDCO will get there," he said.

Resilient sugar mill sector

URC Chairman Lance Gokongwei said the sugar industry overall "has shown its resilience for many, many decades."

"We will continue to invest a lot of energy and funds in ensuring that

For professional farms, it is a supportive partner. "It gives us better participation, gives us better efficiency, and gives us more money per ton that we mill," said Luis Azcona, of San Lucas Inc.

For farmers, the mill has been a lifeline. "The income I get from sugar cane farming helped me send three children to college," said Grace Saglaon, a member of the Alliance Association.

For those working for SONEDCO, the mill has been a second home. The father of shift supervisor Mary Kathlyn Tarroza had worked at SONEDCO as head pan in raw production.

"He rose from the ranks, from evaporator tender to head pan man. He's happy and he's proud that there's career advancement at SONEDCO, and he is proud that I myself am now working for the company," she said.

Mary Grace Cayao, an accounts payable analyst, said her father has been with SONEDCO since the early 50s, working as a driver.

"It was part of our routine when I was growing up. We'd come and see him at the mill, and later I myself wanted to work here," she said.

"Our people at SONEDCO have a sense of optimism that is very infectious, the way they love sugar, the way they love how they grow SONEDCO. For them, nothing is impossible. They only look at opportunities, possibilities," said Lee.



SONEDCO sugar mill plant



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CONCEPCION INKS DEAL WITH CDA TO BOOST AGRIPRENEURSHIP IN COOPERATIVES

A partnership that will link agriculture cooperatives with the country's leading agri companies will soon give small farmers a better chance at scaling up.

A memorandum of understanding signed between Go Negosyo and the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) aims to identify and organize cooperatives, which will then be assisted by big-brother companies in consolidating their produce, meeting market requirements, as well as accessing credit, inputs and training.

The MOU, signed last January 4, aims to create a strategic partnership that would support and implement the objectives of the Kapatid Angat Lahat Agri Program (KALAP) for the benefit of the cooperatives sector in the Philippines.

Signing for Go Negosyo was its founder Joey Concepcion, and for the CDA was its chair Usec. Joseph Encabo.

The bottom line is poverty



BOOSTING AGRIPRENEURSHIP. Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion (second from left) and Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar (left) join Cooperative Development Authority administrator Asec Myrla B. Paradillo (right) and CDA chair Usec Joseph B. Encabo (second from right) at the signing of a memorandum of understanding to support and implement the objectives of the Kapatid Angat Lahat Agri Program (KALAP) for the benefit of the cooperatives sector in the Philippines.

alleviation, and many of the poor are in the agriculture sector. Unless we fix that, we will never solve the problem of poverty," said Concepcion.

With the Philippines still

considered a lower-middle-income economy, increasing the productivity of agriculture, along with the manufacturing sector, is seen as key to raising the country to middle-

income status, a goal that is outlined in the 2023-2028 Philippine Development Plan, the country's road map for socioeconomic progress in the medium term.



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World food prices drop 13.7% in 2023

PARIS: World food prices fell in 2023, with considerable declines for grains and oils as supply concerns eased, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said on Friday.

Overall, world food commodity prices fell 13.7 percent in 2023 against the previous year, Rome-based FAO said.

The FAO's cereals price index fell 15.4 percent, "reflecting well supplied global markets" compared to 2022, when prices soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a major grain exporter.

While supply concerns eased for wheat and maize, the opposite was true for rice due to the impact of the El Niño weather phenomenon and India restricting exports. Rice prices jumped 21 percent last year.

The vegetable oil price index posted the biggest fall last year, dropping 32.7 percent, thanks to improved supplies and reduced use for biofuel

production.

Sugar prices, on the other contrary, jumped 26.7 percent overall, though they retreated from their highs in December, thanks to Brazil stepping up exports and reduced use for biofuels.

While the FAO's overall index dropped, consumer food prices in many countries are rising, often faster than the overall inflation rate.

"The fact that food commodity prices drop doesn't necessarily mean a drop in food prices," noted economist and food industry specialist Bruno Parmentier.

The FAO index measures commodity market prices, and it can take a while for these to filter through to supermarket shelves. They represent only a fraction of the cost of processed final products.

"Flour only represents four to eight percent of the price of a baguette," said Parmentier. "Most of it is the cost of labor and production costs" such as energy, water and rent, he added.

AFP