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EYES WIDE OPEN

IRIS GONZALES

From shame to fame

Whispers and huffs and puffs of frustration and disappointment from losing bidders – coincidentally during a week dedicated to love and lovestruck lovers – made the rounds in the business grapevine but nothing could stop the inevitable. At the end of the work week, the government chose the best offer it received for the upgrade of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA).



Thus, on Friday, two days after Valentine's, the Marcos administration declared the San Miguel Corp.-led consortium as the winner of the 15-year contract to rehabilitate and run our country's main gateway in what may probably be the biggest infrastructure project of Marcos 2.0.

It was, perhaps, to borrow a line from fictional mafia boss Vito Corleone, "an offer they cannot refuse" – minus the blood and gore, of course.

Tycoon Ramon Ang's killer bid was exactly that, offering the government a generous 82.16 percent share of airport revenues, beating rival bidders. The second best offer of at least 75 percent came from the group of Lucio Co and Jeffrey Cheng, although they were disqualified. GMR Consortium submitted a 33.3 percent bid and the tycoons' consortium, a 25.9 percent bid.

Fingers crossed, we're now at the beginning of the end of the NAIA's worst airport era.

Portfolio view

There was a bit of drama in the days leading up to the announcement because the schedule was pushed back by a day – to Feb. 16 instead of Feb. 15.

At that point, there was no telling yet what would happen and the bidders waited with bated breath.

RSA himself was chill and relaxed, even finding the time to fly to Balesin in Quezon to attend the renewal of vows of Heart Evangelista and Sen. Chiz Escudero on Feb. 15.

He was there for six hours before flying back to Manila just in time for the next day's announcement.

Rival bidders were puzzled over SMC's bid but at the end of the day, the bids and awards committee reviewed and approved it.

It's also important to note that the gross revenues by which the 82.16 percent government share would be based do not include yet the passenger service charges or terminal fees. This is expected to go up as most privatization projects go – higher fees, better service.

But sources in the infrastructure industry also said RSA may have taken a portfolio view in coming up with his bid-to-win offer.

This means that he took into consideration the potential of SMC's other businesses to earn from the NAIA modernization, such as more users for SMC's Skyway and NAIA Expressway and potentially more businesses for SMC's cement companies for any con-

struction the NAIA upgrade will require.

This was in stark contrast to the bidding groups which took a stand-alone project view.

Big challenge

In any case, the SMC-led consortium is in for a big, big challenge and RSA knows it.

The good news is that if we look at SMC's infrastructure track record, there are success stories. I'm a Skyway Stage 3 user and although there are choke points at the Quezon Avenue station plus the higher cost of toll, I prefer it than plying EDSA during rush hour.

As for the airport, it will be tough for sure because this isn't just about coming up with a modern gateway. It's also about dismantling money-making syndicates that operate inside.

RSA travels a lot and he loves airplanes and aviation. He is a licensed pilot and his engineer's mind is trained to solve problems even before they come up.

Hopefully, with him at the helm, our airport's journey from shame to fame, a line I borrowed from a senior citizen reader, has begun.

El Niño and food security

The El Niño phenomenon is expected to peak this month and its effect could persist until May.

Are we prepared enough? The STAR has reported that the Department of Agriculture (DA) is urging rice farmers to immediately replant palay soon after their harvest to mitigate the impact of El Niño on rice output.

The DA said this strategy, called Quick Turn Around (QTA), is one of the measures it is implementing to mitigate the impact of the dry spell on water resources to ensure continuous rice output, our agriculture beat reporter Jasper Arcalas said in his report.

It's good that Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. is on top of the situation.

Hopefully, he will also focus on ensuring food security by having direct interaction with the farmers. This is how Rafael Salas did it during the time of Marcos Sr.

Sec. Laurel can heed the suggestions of agriculture experts from UP Los Baños, including Dr. Resty Collado, president of the UPLB College of Agriculture and Food Science Alumni Association.

Organizing a food security summit, Dr. Collado said, can help the top 30 rice-producing provinces in the country improve their production.

They need incentives as well, including seeds and fertilizers, small tractors and farm machinery, farm-to-market roads and rice mills.

One problem of the DA is organizational. There are too many plans and policies and some may not be feasible.

The key to addressing this, Dr. Collado said, is to work with the LGUs who are directly in contact with the farmers.

Our farmers, who day in and day out toil the earth with their sun-baked hands, after all, know best what they need to increase rice production.

* * *

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El Niño to hit 10 more provinces by end-Feb.

By JEL SANTOS

As the El Niño phenomenon continues to wreak havoc in the country, an official warned that at least 10 more provinces could be impacted by the dry spell by the end of the month.

"By the end of February ay inasahan pong tataas pa po itong mga probinsiya na maaapektuhan ng El Niño, siguro by at least 10 (By the end of February, it is expected that the number of provinces affected by El Niño will increase, maybe by at least 10)," El Niño Task ► 5

El Niño to hit 10 more provinces by end-Feb. 1◀

Force spokesperson and Presidential Communications Office (PCO) Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama said during a forum in Quezon City on Saturday, Feb. 17.

He had earlier announced that 41 provinces are already affected by the phenomenon. However, he did not disclose the list of the El Niño-hit provinces.

He said the task force was closely monitoring various sectors due to the "strong El Niño" being experienced by the country.

"In terms of what is being monitored at kung ano po iyong binabantayan ng task force, ayon na rin sa direktiba ng ating Pangulo, iyan po ang food security, ang water supply, power supply, health at saka po iyong kung magkakaroon po ng pagtaas sa mga presyo (Based on the directive of the President, the task force is monitoring food security, water supply, power supply, health, and the increase in prices)," he said.

The spokesperson noted that agricultural damage—rice and corn—has been recorded in the regions of Western Visayas and Zamboanga

Peninsula.

As per data coming from the Department of Agriculture (DA) as of Feb. 8, the damage and losses caused by El Niño in Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula has already reached ₱151.3 million.

The agency noted that nearly 4,000 farmers in these areas have been affected by the phenomenon.

The DA said most of the damage and losses were on rice and corn products that are in their reproductive stage.

Villarama noted that there are "other regions now affected by the dry spell but authorities have yet to receive a report on the extent of damage..."

Regarding the temperature, Villarama said that according to the most recent briefing from the state weather bureau, it might get as high as 40 degrees in Northern Luzon and as high as 36.5 degrees in Metro Manila.

To mitigate the impact of the phenomenon, the DA recently announced that it will implement rice farming strategies that utilize less water.

The farming strategies are "Alternate Wetting and Drying" or AWD which uses less water for farming, and "Quick Turn Around" or QTA which allows immediate rice replanting right after harvest.

DA Assistant Secretary for Operations U-Nichols Manalo said AWD is a water-saving technology that rice farmers can employ to lower their water use in irrigated fields.

Meantime, he said the QTA is a method in which all rice farms after harvest must replant immediately without waiting for the subsequent planting season to begin.

Manalo said the DA has contacted over one million farmers to install water-saving technologies in around 15,000 hectares of rice fields.

According to the DA, farmers have already started replanting in over 5,500 hectares of rice fields.

The agency aims to implement the quick-turn-around strategy on more than 26,000 hectares.

The DA said such measures were implemented in compliance with President Marcos' Executive Order (EO) No. 53, which directs the government to streamline, reactivate, and reconstitute the old El Niño task forces under EO No. 16 (s. 2001) and Memorandum Order No. 38 (s. 2019). The EO was signed by the President last Jan. 19.



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Marcos to PCG, BFAR: Stay put in disputed waters

BY CATHERINE S. VALENTE, KRISTINA MARALIT, FRANCO S. BARONA

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ordered the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) to continue its rotational deployment of ships in the West Philippine Sea in a move that "does not intend to provoke anybody" but will merely ensure that Filipino fishers are protected against China's harassment and incursions.

The President's order comes as Chinese vessels moved to block access to Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal on Saturday morning as Philippine ships conducted another Rotation and Resupply (RoRe) mission to Filipino troops stationed on board BRP Sierra Madre.

Before Saturday's incident, Raymond Powell, a retired United States Air Force colonel and founder and director of

SeaLight, a maritime transparency project monitoring and reporting South China Sea activities, lauded the President's policies in dealing with Beijing and its aggressive actions in the contested waterway.

"The Marcos administration has certainly shown a lot of courage. It is not easy for a country of 125 million to take on a country of 1.4 billion, a rising power with

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Marcos to PCG, BFAR

nuclear weapons," Powell, a former defense attaché of the US government to Vietnam and Australia, recently told *The Manila Times*.

"That's not easy; that takes what we call intestinal fortitude. It takes guts, and I've certainly been impressed with the Marcos administration and its willingness to risk escalation for the sake of asserting its (the Philippines') sovereignty," he added.

In a Saturday news forum in Quezon City, PCG spokesman for WPS Jay Tarriela dismissed comments that the Philippines was provoking China or escalating tension in the WPS with the rotational deployment of vessels by the PCG and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in Bajo de Masinloc or the Scarborough Shoal where Chinese ships were reported to have driven away Filipino fishermen. This has since been denied by the government.

"You know, their presence, with or without the government vessels' rotational deployment of PCG and BFAR vessels in Bajo de Masinloc, they were there," Tarriela told reporters.

"Our objective here is not to provoke anybody, not to escalate the tension in Bajo de Masinloc. Our objective here is to protect the Filipino fishermen, to make sure the Filipino fishermen will be able to fish in Bajo de Masinloc," he added.

Tarriela said that the guidance of the President is very clear — "to have a rational deployment between the Philippine Coast Guard and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources to maintain our presence in Bajo de Masinloc."

He said the PCG had maintained its presence in Philippine waters from February 1 to 9 while the BFAR deployed its personnel after their shift in the rotational deployment.

Tarriela also said the BFAR had deployed its BRP Datu Tamblot, or the MMOV-3005 and the Cessna Caravan, the RP-1077, and the Cessna 208-B and its aircraft that came from Clark, Pampanga.

"The guidance of the President has been very clear. The rotational deployment will be here to stay between the Philippine Coast Guard and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources," the PCG official said.

"The objective of which is also related to the first question — for the food security, to make sure that we're going to protect the Filipino fishermen's rights and to ensure that the Filipino fishermen will go their fishing freely without any harassment," he added.

During its latest patrol, Tarriela said the PCG continues to experience "dangerous maritime maneuvers" from Chinese vessels in the WPS.

He said they had monitored four China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels and a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy vessel.

Tarriela said the vessels identified as CCG 3063 and 3064 have been deployed in the area to make sure that the southeast entrance of Bajo de Masinloc is well-guarded by putting floating barriers every time they monitored Philippine vessels nearby.

He added that they monitored CCG 3302 and 3105, carrying out "dangerous maneuvers" to prevent the BFAR and PCG vessels from getting near Bajo de Masinloc.

Meanwhile, BFAR said it has successfully provided assistance and provisions to Filipino fishermen in Bajo de Masinloc.

During the same Saturday's new forum, BFAR spokesman Naz Briguera said the resupply mission of the BFAR and the PCG to Filipino fishermen in Bajo de Masinloc is aligned with the vision of the "Bagong Pilipinas"

ensuring food security.

"It's not just about the volume of fisheries production, but it's about the importance of the West Philippine Sea in maintaining the integrity of our marine resources," Briguera said.

Another Chinese blockade in Ayungin

Meanwhile, several Chinese vessels were seen blocking the Philippine ships on resupply missions to the BRP Sierra Madre.

Powell said a China Coast Guard vessel with bow number 5203 and two Chinese maritime militia (CMM) ships moved to block access to Ayungin as PCG ships BRP Cabra and Sindangan passed south of the shoal and nearby Mischief (Panganiban) Reef.

This latest blockade by China in Ayungin Shoal comes two days after the incident in Bajo de Masinloc, where the CCG claimed to have "implemented measures to control the [Philippine] vessel's navigation and compel it to leave the area in accordance with law" and that the situation was handled in a "professional and standardized manner on-site."

'Assertive transparency'

Powell said the country's unceasing filing of diplomatic protests and publication of photos and reports of harassment incidents of the CCG and CMM are examples of the government's "assertive transparency" as this sheds light on what China has been doing in the shadows.

He cited the Feb. 6, 2023 incident at the Ayungin Shoal when a CCG ship used a military-grade laser to drive away a Philippine Coast Guard vessel.

Documentation of the incident made by the PCG was released, a move that Beijing obviously was displeased about as this garnered more international attention, which led to more support com-

ing the way of the Philippines.

"The Philippines discovered something that it could use as leverage in the struggle," Powell said.

"The Philippines is obviously overmatched by the strength of the CCG and Chinese maritime militia ships, but what it did have was essentially a moral high ground," he added.

Said "braver" front of the Philippines has certainly erased the "false dichotomy" presented by the past leadership of Rodrigo Duterte, who was perceived to have a "pro-China" policy, Powell asserted.

"I think President Duterte, in evaluating the situation in the West Philippine Sea, said, 'We don't want to go to war with China.' Well, nobody says you have to go to war with China. What was made was a false dichotomy, a false choice — either submit or have peace or contest and have war," he said.

"But that's not the way it works. It's not like an on-and-off switch. There are many different ways you can approach it, and if submission is your only option, then all you'd find out is that your adversary will take advantage of you," he added.

Marcos has reiterated numerous times that the Philippines "will not give up a single square inch of our territory to any foreign power" and that under his watch, the country would fully and unrelentingly assert its sovereignty in adherence "to the lawful exercise of rights under international law demonstrates the strength of the alliances."

"Supported by the rules-based international order and our growing partnerships, both time-tested and new ones, we will insist on the preservation of the sovereignty and integrity of the country while working closely with international partners in the bilateral, regional, and multilateral settings in developing rules and processes to address these challenges," the President said.



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BFAR: Foreign fishers using cyanide in Bajo de Masinloc

Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen were reportedly destroying corals and marine resources in Bajo de Masinloc (Panatag Shoal) by using cyanide to catch fish, the Bureau of Fish and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said yesterday.

BFAR spokesman Nazario Briguera said that based on information gathered by the agency's ground personnel, the illegal activity had already caused extensive dam-

age within the lagoon area.

According to Briguera, Filipino fishermen reported witnessing the use of cyanide in the area by the foreigners.

"These fishers, as claimed by Filipino counterparts, purportedly aim to destroy Bajo de Masinloc, to prevent or discourage Filipino fishing boats from accessing the rich marine resources in the region," he said.

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BFAR From Page 1

He emphasized the gravity of such malpractice, saying it is wreaking havoc on marine resources, the effect of which is on the entire marine ecosystem.

"This compromises the integrity of the whole marine resources not only of the Philippines but including the waters of the other countries because our seas are connected," he said.

He explained that the use of cyanide not only kills target fish species but also harms fish larvae and coral reefs.

He underscored the significance of corals as living organisms, emphasizing that poisoning fish also harms or even kills the delicate balance of the marine environment.

"When you use poison, not only will your target species die, but also the fish larvae, the corals themselves, the corals are alive, they are living creatures, the corals are not rocks," he said.

Briguera also denounced the practice as a clear case of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

He said that if confirmed, the use of cyanide by Chinese fishers "would constitute a violation of international agreements, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."

Briguera stressed that IUU fishing undermines the sustainability of marine ecosystems, not only in Philippine waters but globally.

In response to a question about the implications of such actions on Philippine sovereignty, Philippine Coast Guard spokesman to the West Philippine Sea Jay Tarriela said destruction of marine environment is not only a threat to sovereignty but a crime against humanity as well.

It will take years or even decades before those corals will be revived, he said, "and it's not just the Philippines that is going to be affected."

He warned that persistent destruction of marine resources by any nation, including China, would have far-reaching impact on the entire West Philippine Sea and global marine biodiversity.

He also called for the need for documentation and legal action against violators.

Meanwhile, marine science experts are pushing for a whole-of-community approach to protect the marine environment in the West Philippine Sea amid continuous destructive activities by some states.

"The commitment to secure the territorial waters is not only limited to implementing the national security strategy but also extends to protecting the marine environment. To fulfill this commitment, the country must take a whole-of-community or a whole-of-Philippine society approach, including the government, private sector and civil society organizations," Stratbase Institute president Dindo Manhit said at a forum on Thursday organized by the Stratbase Institute, in partnership with the Japanese embassy. — Mark Ernest Villeza, Rodel Clapano

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Editorial

Sinisira ng China ang Bajo de Masinloc

HINDI lamang pala ang pambu-bully sa mga Pilipinong mangingisda sa Bajo de Masinloc ang masamang ginagawa ng China kundi pati na rin ang malawakang pagsira sa mga lamandagat sa nasabing shoal. Gumagamit umano ng cyanide ang mga Chinese fishermen sa paghuli ng isda sa nasabing lugar na pag-aari ng Pilipinas. Ang Bajo de Masinloc ay 220 kilometers ang layo sa Zambales. Bukod sa mga Chinese, gumagamit din ng cyanide ang mga Vietnamese fishermen. Sabi ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) milyun-milyong piso ang damage sa mga lamandagat dahil sa cyanide fishing. Apektado rin ng cyanide ang corals na tirahan ng mga isda. Ang Bajo de Masinloc ang sinasabing pinakamaraming nahuhuling isda. Ito ang dahilan kaya ayaw papasukin doon ang mga mangingisdang Pinoy.

Noong Biyernes, sinabi ni National Security Adviser Eduardo Año na magsisimula nang magpatrulya ang Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) at BFAR sa paligid ng Bajo de Masinloc upang mabantayan ang shoal at pati na rin ang mga mangingisdang Pinoy na maraming ulit nang nakaranas nang pambu-bully sa China Coast Guard.

Ayon kay Año, nanggaling ang direktiba kay President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Sinabi pa ni Año na sisiguruhin nila na mabibigyan ng proteksiyon ang mga Pilipinong mangingisda. Hindi umano hahayaan na maulit ang mga ginagawang panggigipit sa mga Pilipinong mangingisda.

Noon nakaraang Enero, limang miyembro ng China Coast Guards (CCG) ang nang-harassed sa mga mangingisdang Pilipino habang kumukuha ng mga kabibi sa Bajo de Masinloc. Na-videohan ng mga mangingisda ang pangha-harass ng CCG members. Hinarang ng CCG na nakasakay sa rubber boat ang mga mangingisda. Hinawakan ng mga ito ang bangka ng mga Pinoy fishermen para hindi makaalis.

Ayon sa mga mangingisdang Pinoys, nilapitan sila ng CCG nang makitang kumukuha ng mga kabibi. Nang makita ng mga CCG ang mga nakuha nilang kabibi na nasa bangka, inutusan umano sila ng mga ito na ibalik ang mga iyon sa dagat.

Hindi ito ang unang pagkakataon na hinarass ang mga mangingisda sa Bajo de Masinloc. Noong Disyembre 2023, hinarang ang mga mangingisdang Pinoys ng mga Chinese militia at saka itinaboy. Dahil sa ginawa ng mga Chinese militia, walang naiuwing huli ang mga mangingisda. Wala silang kinita kaya gutom ang inabot nila at pati ang pamilyang umaasa sa kanila.

Ang gagawing pagpapatrulya ng PCG at BFAR sa Bajo de Masinloc ay dapat gawing regular. Kailangang magpakita ng ngipin ang Pilipinas sa China sa pagkakataong ito. Pag-aari ng Pilipinas ang Bajo de Masinloc kaya dapat lumaban.



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HARASSMENT

THE Philippine government continues to experience dangerous maritime maneuvers from Chinese vessels in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) as it did not stop with the deployment of its coast guard and militia boat even in the presence of Philippine maritime assets.

Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) spokesman for WPS Commodore Jay Tarriela told reporters in a news forum in Quezon City on Saturday that they have monitored four Chinese Coast Guard



(CCG) vessels and People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy vessel.

Tarriela said the vessels identified as CCG 3063 and 3064 have

been deployed in the area to make sure that the southeast entrance of Bajo de Masinloc is well-guarded by putting floating barriers

every time they monitored Philippine vessels nearby.

He added that they monitored CCG 3302 and 3105, carrying out "dangerous maneuver" to prevent the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and PCG vessels from getting near Bajo de Masinloc.

"These are the four Chinese maritime militia that we also documented who actively participated in blocking and also carrying out dangerous maneuver to prevent the BFAR

vessel in getting close sa Bajo de Masinloc," Tarriela said.

"We experienced of course dangerous maneuver ... and then shadowing not just from the PLA Navy but even from the Chinese Coast Guard and also the Chinese maritime militia. There is also participation from the Chinese maritime militia," he added.

PCO



Presyo ng pagkain bantayan sa El Niño - PBBM

Binabantayan ngayon ng binuong Task Force El Niño ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. ang presyo ng mga pagkain sa merkado sa harap ng nararanasang tagtuyot sa bansa.

Bukod sa presyo ng pagkain, nakatu-tok din ang task force sa sitwasyon ng suplay ng tubig at kuryente alinsunod na rin sa ipinag-utos ng Malacañang.

"In terms of what is being monitored at kung ano po iyong binabantayan ng task force, ayon na rin sa direktiba ng ating Pangulo, iyan po ang food security, ang water supply, power supply, health at saka iyong kung magkakaroon po ng pagtaas sa mga presyo," sabi ni Task Force El Niño spokesperson at Presiden-

tial Communications Office (PCO) Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama sa isang news forum sa Quezon City nitong Sabado, Pebrero 17.

Nauna nang ipinahayag ni Agriculture Undersecretary for Operations Roger Navarro na sapat ang suplay ng bigas sa bansa dahil bukod sa harvest season ay dumating na rin nitong nagdaang buwan ng Enero ang mga imported rice.

Subalit malaking hamon aniya sa kanila na ibaba ang presyo ng bigas dahil tumaas ang demand nito sanhi ng export ban ng India sa non-basmati rice bukod pa sa pinangangambahang epekto ng El Niño sa agrikultura at ang mataas na presyo ng fertilizer at iba pang farm inputs.



BAJO DE MASINLOC WINAWASAK SA CYANIDE

Ibinunyag ng isang opisyal ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) na gumagamit ng cyanide ang mga mangingisdang Chinese at Vietnamese dahilang para masira ang Bajo de Masinloc na teritoryo pa ng Pilipinas.

Matatagpuan ang Bajo de Masinloc 124 nautical miles sa Zambales, na sakop pa ng exclusive economic zone (EEZ) ng bansa.

"According to Philippine fishermen, 'yong

mga Chinese fishermen, if I'm not mistaken, ay gumagamit ng cyanide as well as 'yong mga Vietnamese fisher,' ayon kay BFAR chief information officer Nazario Briguera sa isang news forum sa Quezon City nitong Sabado, Pebrero 17.

Kaya nawawasak na umano ang mga bahagi ng lagoon na mayaman sa mga lamang-dagat at tinatayang nasa bilyong halaga na ang napinsala.

Ayon kay Briguera,

sadyang winawasak ng mga mangingisdang Chinese ang Bajo de Masinloc upang hindi makapangisda sa lugar ang mga Pilipino.

Binigyang-diin ni Briguera na ang pagkasira ng mga coral reef sa Bajo de Masinloc ay malinaw na kaso ng "illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing".

"These are serious concerns that we need to condemn on the part of the BFAR because this actually compromises the integrity of

the whole marine resources, not just in the Philippines but including adjoining waters of other countries," dagdag pa ng opisyal.

Sa naturang forum, nangako naman si Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) Spokesperson Commodore Jay Tariela na ipagpapatuloy nila ang presensya ng mga patrol boat sa Bajo de Masinloc upang matiyak ang kaligtasan ng mga mangingisdang Pilipino. (Dolly Cabreza)



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Govt on tight watch over food prices, power supply amid El Niño

THE government is on a tight watch over food prices, water and power supply as it anticipates the El Niño to affect more provinces by the end of February.

At a news forum in Quezon City on Saturday, Task Force El Niño spokesman and Presidential Communications Office Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama said 41 provinces are currently affected by the weather phenomenon.

He said 10 more may be added to the list before March.

In Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula alone, the government has monitored P151 million in losses in rice and corn.

Of the 41 provinces, 17 are currently experiencing dry conditions, 10 are under dry spells, and 14 are experiencing drought.

"In terms of what is being monitored at kung ano po iyong binabantayan ng task force, ayon na rin sa direktiba ng ating Pangulo, iyan po ang food security, ang water supply, obviously power supply, health at saka po iyong kung magkakaroon po ng pagtaas sa mga presyo (based on the directive of the Chief Executive, we are monitoring our food security, water and power supply, health, and food prices)," Villarama said.

"Diyan po papasok iyong fiscal measures (This is where our fiscal measures will enter)," he added.

The official added that the Department of Health (DoH) is monitoring water-borne and vector-driven diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, dengue and chikungunya.

"So far, wala pa pong naitatala ang Department of Health na anumang outbreak (the DoH has not monitored any outbreak)," he said.

The weather bureau earlier said that strong effects of El Niño will persist until the end of March.

PNA



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El Niño to scorch MM, north Luzon

40°C

Half of Phl provinces to experience drought

By MARK ERNEST VILLEZA

The country is expected to sizzle in the coming weeks with temperatures rising to as high as 40 degrees Celsius in Metro Manila and Northern Luzon due to the impact of the El Niño phenomenon.

This was according to El Niño task force spokesman Joey Villarama, who revealed that high temperatures would prevail despite the northeast monsoon.

"As early as January, we were already experiencing a strong and mature El Niño. There is no quantitative mea-

sure of what a strong and mature El Niño is, but let's say it should be cold now, but it's already quite warm," Villarama said.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said temperatures could reach up to 36.5 degrees Celsius nationwide and up to 40 degrees Celsius in Metro Manila and Northern Luzon.

He said at least 17 provinces have already been affected by dry conditions due to El Niño, while 10 provinces have dry spells and 14 are experiencing drought.

Villarama reported significant damage to rice and corn crops in Regions 6 (Western Visayas) and 9 (Zamboanga

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Peninsula), totaling around P151 million.

He also highlighted the Task Force's focus on monitoring food security, water supply, power supply, health concerns and potential price increases as part of directives from President Marcos.

He said extreme heat could also spawn health concerns, especially waterborne diseases due to inadequate supply of clean water supply.

Villarama emphasized the importance of monitoring vulnerable populations, such as children and senior citizens, for heat-related illnesses like heat stroke and skin problems.

Asked about ongoing relief efforts, Villarama revealed that almost 4,000 affected farmers in Regions 6 and 9 have received assistance.

While he did not give details, Villarama said beneficiaries received "qualitative support" such as heat-tolerant seeds for farmers, social protection for domestic animals and ongoing efforts to repair irrigation canals.

Sought for comment on the distinction between actual temperature and heat index, Villarama clarified that the heat index, which factors in humidity, has not been included in the current temperature assessments. But he stressed that rising temperatures exacerbate the overall heat felt.

Meanwhile, PAGASA said 41 of the country's 82 provinces may experience drought conditions when the impact of the El Niño phenomenon reaches its peak in April or May.

Drought conditions are characterized by below normal rainfall conditions or 21 percent to 60 percent reduction from average for five consecutive months or way below normal rainfall conditions for three consecutive months.

Nearly all of the provinces nationwide may experience some effects of El Niño, according to Ana Solis, officer-in-charge of the climatology and agrometeorology division of PAGASA.

State weather forecasters earlier said that El Niño-affected provinces may rise to 51 by the end of February.

Data from the state weather bureau said 24 provinces may experience drought by end of the month.

State seismologists said the strong and mature El Niño would continue through this month but most global climate models see the phenomenon persisting into the March-May season.

PAGASA also warned of higher temperatures by April and May, or hotter than usually experienced in the country during the period. — With Romina Cabrera