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SMC partners face scrutiny

BIZ BUZZ



The Department of Transportation has already declared the San Miguel Corp. (SMC)-led consortium the winner of the bidding for the contract to operate and maintain Ninoy Aquino International Airport. Yet, it continues to be dogged with questions about the viability of its winning bid.

Some observers are specifically concerned about its partners—specifically RLW Aviation Development Inc. and RMM Asian Logistics Inc.—as there seems to be so little information about them considering the scope and scale of the undertaking.

A quick Google search about these companies will not yield significant results, apart from the recent news written about them due to the bidding.

In fact, market insights firm CreditSights has observed the same thing. “We were unable to find publicly available information on the nature, shareholding and financials of these companies,” it explained.

CreditSights noted that SMC’s press statements only highlights the other partner, Incheon International Airport Corp.

“Though SMC in its press release did not disclose or refute if the two entities are in any way related to SMC, we cannot rule out the possibility that they are related parties of SMC,” the firm said.

The firm said that if these companies were indeed related to San Miguel, this means the conglomerate will actually spend more than the assumption under the deal.

Will we eventually know more about these companies as the group moves forward with the highly coveted project? Let’s see! —**TYRONE JASPER C. PIAD**

DDB Group gets sweet vindication

DDB Group Philippines, which was stripped last year of its lucrative contract with the Department of Tourism (DOT) due to alleged plagiarism, got

some deserved vindication recently when it bagged the coveted “Agency of the Year” title at the 59th Anvil Awards hosted by the Public Relations Society of the Philippines.

DDB won the prestigious award after securing six Gold and 13 Silver Anvils. The winning campaigns include those with Mang Inasal, the Asian Hospital and Medical Center, PepsiCo Philippines, PLDT and Jollibee through public relations unit Ripple8.

The hard-fought wins during the Anvil Awards, deemed the “Oscar’s of Public Relations” in the Philippines, were like a balm after the severe bruising it got last year when the DOT terminated its contract for the promotional campaign around the new “Love the Philippines” slogan.

So why we are still seeing the “Love the Philippines” slogan and materials?

It’s because DDB decided to just donate to the government the logo, slogan, brand guidelines and global market research for the campaign “Love the Philippines” as an act of goodwill.

Indeed, the DOT continues to extensively use the “Love the Philippines” branding campaign in the Philippines and abroad.

DDB, meanwhile, has kept its clients even at the height of the brouhaha, and perhaps will get even more with the recent win. —**TINA ARCEO-DUMLAO**

Crackdown on questionable apps cheered

Industry observers are cheering the aggressive moves by the Games and Amusements Board (GAB) to combat the proliferation of popular foreign-backed social apps that are unfortunately facilitating illegal online gambling.

GAB, chaired by **Richard Clarin**, recently teamed up with the National Telecommunications Commission and telecommunications companies to identify and then shut down these illegal sites, which are polluting the digital environment and producing social ills associated with illegal gambling such as financial ruin and

family breakdowns.

“We are fully aware that these illegal operators put up new sites the moment we succeed in shutting down one. [But] their modus operandi is not going to deter us from hunting them down day in and day out,” Clarin said.

The GAB thus joined global efforts to crack down on a number of Chinese livestreaming apps that have been linked to indecent content and illegal activities.

Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, earlier banned some popular apps for various offenses, underscoring the global community’s increasing focus on holding digital platforms accountable for their content.

By adopting similar actions, the GAB and its partners in the public and private sectors will not only protect Filipinos against the potential harm associated with these questionable online activities but also make the flourishing digital environment more safe and conducive to continuous innovation. —**TINA ARCEO-DUMLAO**

DA shake-up continues

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. made another leadership shakeup at the Department of Agriculture (DA).

In a special order dated Feb. 15, Tiu Laurel gave another responsibility to **Alvin John Balagbag** on top of his designation as undersecretary and chief of staff: undersecretary for DA inspectorate and enforcement.

Before this development, **James Layug** was at the forefront of the agency’s aggressive campaign against smuggled agricultural products.

As of writing, Layug is still listed in the DA’s website as the assistant secretary for DA inspectorate and enforcement.

Since Tiu Laurel’s appointment in November last year, the DA management team has expanded to include nine undersecretaries, one undersecretary-designate, five assistant secretaries and two assistant secretary-designates including Balagbag and Layug.

—**JORDEENE LAGARE INQ**



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DTI, CIAC partner for P8.5-B food hub

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Agriculture (DA) have forged a partnership with the Clark International Airport Corp. (CIAC) to establish the P8.5-billion mega food hub in Clark City, Pampanga.

The planned National Food Hub in Clark City aligns with the farm-to-fork approach outlined in the Three-Year Food Logistic Action Agenda, aiming to transform the food distribution system nationwide.

"This MoU (memorandum of understanding) will accelerate the government's efforts to make food available, accessible and more affordable to the consuming public. The DTI expresses its full commitment to this initiative given our two-pronged objectives to ensure logistics efficiency and expand food exports," Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual said during the signing ceremony on Monday.

The 64-hectare Clark National

Food Hub, to be located in the Clark Civil Aviation Complex (CCAC), aligns with the government's vision of positioning the Philippines as a premier agricultural hub regionally and globally.

It will also serve as the country's primary wholesale market and distribution center for high-quality food products.

"The National Food Hub, in tandem with the CIAC's six other flagship projects, will be a game-changer for the Philippines' overall agricultural productivity and the revitalization of our exports sector. And key to everything is partnerships like this — where minds and wills align," CIAC President Arrey

Perez said.

He added that they are making significant progress in seeking out key investors and major food corporations and collaboration with the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Center to finalize the project preparation phases and expedite the groundbreaking process as soon as possible.

The first phase of the project is expected to be completed by 2028, Perez said.

"Clark is ideal for the mega food hub because of its expansive space for infrastructure and facilities, and seamless road network connecting north, central and south Luzon to the world-class Clark airport capable of handling cargo and logistics," said Perez.

Under the MoU, the DA will spearhead the development of the policy framework, public investments, and support services essential for domestic and export-focused enterprises to advance the objectives of the food hub.

This covers securing funds for the establishment or enhancement

of cold chain facilities and food terminals to expand the logistics network of the food hub.

The DTI will offer assistance to foster investments in constructing and managing the said project, while also playing a pivotal role in promoting market and logistical connections between producers and institutional buyers.

For his part, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said that the partnership leverages the financial resources, technical expertise and innovative technologies of the private sector to attain the necessary economies of scale in agricultural production.

"The National Food Hub embodies the topmost strategy of our national government towards an inter-agency collaboration towards the achievement of multiple and cross-cutting goals such as the enhancing of food security, reducing of food inflation, increasing the purchasing power of the income of the households, and ultimately, increasing the income of our farmers," said Tiu Laurel.



NSC to probe Chinese fishermen using cyanide at Masinloc shoal

AUTHORITIES are looking into a report that Chinese fishermen were allegedly using cyanide to destroy the resource-rich Bajo de Masinloc and prevent Filipinos from fishing in the area.

National Security Council (NSC) Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya said that while the council was “alarmed” over the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** report, there was a need to validate the claims further.

The official said he requested the BFAR to complete the documentation that it has taken—including affidavits—which will then be turned over to the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea.

“We will investigate this report,” Malaya said.

Once validated, Malaya said they would forward the report to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of the Solicitor General, which is preparing a case against China for environmental degradation.

“The challenge dito is to prove the responsibility for the coral degradation and the impact to the environment is coming from these specific people,” Malaya,

quoted by ABS-CBN News, said.

BFAR Chief Information Officer Nazario Briguera recently claimed that as a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China was committing a violation with its deliberate destruction of the Bajo de Masinloc, which “undermines the sustainability not just of our waters but of the whole world.”

The NSC meanwhile encouraged Filipino fishermen to continue fishing near Bajo de Masinloc, citing the country’s right to the area as part of its territory.

“That is Philippine territory and let’s strengthen the presence of our government through the Coast Guard, through the BFAR, and, of course, the regular patrols of the Philippine Navy to show to the whole world, especially to those causing trouble

for us there,” Malaya said.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. recently directed concerned agencies to maintain the country’s maritime presence following provocations and aggressive behavior from Chinese vessels in the West Philippine Sea.

Following the President’s order’s, NSC said the increase of patrol vessels in the area.

On the possibility of China’s use of cyanide to block Filipino fishermen, Malaya said an investigation would be needed to confirm the allegations.

The BFAR reported that there were foreign vessels using cyanide to intentionally destroy the marine environment in the Scarborough Shoal, a fish-rich atoll inside the West Philippine Sea. **Charles Dantes**

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NEWS

PH to verify cyanide use in West PH Sea

The National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea has directed the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources** to gather more evidence on the alleged use of cyanide by Chinese fishermen in Scarborough Shoal. Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya of the National Security Council said the findings, if validated, could be used to build a case on environmental destruction. —STORY BY **A4**
MELVIN GASCON AND JOANNA ROSE AGLIBOT



PH to build case on Sino fishers' alleged cyanide use in WPS

By Melvin Gascon
and Joanna Rose Aglibot
@Team_Inquirer

The National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) has directed the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to gather more evidence on the alleged use of cyanide by Chinese fishermen in Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal).

"We have instructed BFAR to complete the documentation that [they] have taken, the pieces of evidence and affidavits they have so far obtained, [and] we will investigate this report," Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya of the National Security Council (NSC) said during the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon television briefing on Monday.

The NTF-WPS was established by Memorandum Circular No. 94 issued by the Office of the President on March 17, 2016. According to that order, the NSC shall provide "administrative and technical support" to the task force.

Malaya said the findings, if validated, could be forwarded

to the Department of Justice and the Office of the Solicitor General for building a case on environmental destruction before an appropriate international tribunal.

He emphasized that "we have to be careful" in verifying BFAR's claim of cyanide use by Chinese fishermen.

BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said in a news forum on Feb. 17 that "These Chinese fishermen use cyanide. They intentionally destroy Bajo de Masinloc to prevent Filipino fishing boats from fishing in the area."

"[The question is], do we have the solid evidence to prove our allegations so that we will not face difficulty to prove to the court?" Malaya said, as he noted that BFAR's assertion was based on what Filipino fishermen had told the agency.

Fernando Hicap, national chair of fisherfolk group Pamalakaya, had also claimed that "Filipino fishermen have long known and reported China's use of sodium cyanide [so they could get a good] catch like octopus, lapu-lapu (grouper), lobster and



TRADITIONAL FISHING GROUND This 2016 photo taken by a drone camera shows part of Scarborough Shoal, also known as Panatag and Bajo de Masinloc, which is a traditional fishing ground of Filipino fishermen in the West Philippine Sea that is being claimed by China. —REM ZAMORA

others—in addition to its purpose of deliberately destroying the reef so that fish and Filipino fishermen will never return."

'Long overdue'

Malaya said BFAR had been directed "to collect all of those testimonies."

He also called on Filipino fishermen to maintain their activities in Bajo de Masinloc, a

shoal off Zambales province.

"Keep on fishing in that area [because] that is part of our territory and the government is going to support you," he said.

Malaya also cited a recent resupply mission which brought 14,000 liters of diesel fuel, 60 liters of motor oil, food packs and other essentials to 21 Filipino fishing boats there.

The fishermen said the gov-

ernment's support was "long overdue."

"So much has happened, why only now?" asked Leonardo Cuaresma, president of the New Masinloc Fishermen Association, based in the town of the same name in the coastal province of Zambales.

It was only recently that the government had ordered the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and BFAR to hold "rotational patrols" at Bajo de Masinloc.

Fisherman Jeffrey Elad, 43, said, "I hope it will come true and it won't just be words, because when we went there this month, there was no Philippine Coast Guard, only the Chinese coast guard."

"But we are thankful because if they [PCG] guard the area, we will be free to fish there instead of just stay outside [that area]," he added.

'Filipino, out'

Cuaresma and other Masinloc fishermen interviewed by the Inquirer said they had encountered Chinese vessels not only at Bajo de Masinloc but

even about 50 kilometers from the municipal waters.

"They are really close, so even those who don't make it to Scarborough are scared when they see the Chinese ships," Cuaresma said.

Ronnie Drio, 55, said Chinese aggression in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) had intensified.

"In the past, they would just shoo you away. They would say, 'Filipino, out.' But now they will block or chase you until you leave," he said.

"They're too close. It's like they own the whole Philippines. People from nearby Cato village in Infanta, Pangasinan, also noticed that," Drio added.

Bobby Roldan, Luzon vice chair of Pamalakaya, said, "If only the government had been prompt in patrolling our territorial waters, cases of harassment against Filipino fisherfolk could have been prevented."

"With or without government authorities, Filipino fishermen will assert national sovereignty and fishing rights against any foreign aggressors," he added. INQ

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Maintain Philippine presence in West PH Sea, Marcos orders

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS

President Marcos has directed the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Bureau of Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to continue their deployment in Bajo de Masinloc following China's continued presence in the disputed water.

In a forum over the weekend, PCG spokesman for the West Philippine Sea (WPS), Commodore Jay Tarriela, said Marcos ordered them to maintain the country's presence in the WPS, particularly in Bajo

de Masinloc which is a traditional fishing ground for Filipinos.

"Dahil dito (Because of this), it is now the guidance of our President 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.

Tarriela explained the PCG was present in the Philippine waters from Feb. 1 to 9 while the BFAR deployed its personnel after their shift in conducting the rotational deployment. ► 5

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He said the BFAR has deployed its BRP Datu Tamblot, or the MMOV-3005, the Cessna Caravan, the RP-1077, and the Cessna 208-B and its aircraft from Clark, Pampanga.

During BFAR's patrol in the area, Tarriela said the China Coast Guard vessel 3105 shadowed BFAR's Tamblot when it reached a distance of one nautical mile off Bajo de Masinloc.

"So, dinikitan siya at (They shadowed it) from then on, hindi na siya binitawan (they didn't let up). The entire presence [of the] BFAR vessel [there], it was consistently shadowed by the Chinese Coast Guard vessel, particularly this one—China Coast Guard 3105," he said.

Earlier, National Task Force for West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS) chairman and National Security Adviser Eduardo Año announced that starting this month, PCG and BFAR civilian vessels would be regularly seen patrolling the Bajo de Masinloc to ensure Filipino fishermen will be able to enter and fish in the area despite Chinese presence.

"These efforts aim to ensure the safety and security of our Filipino fishermen in their traditional fishing grounds," Año said.



Philippine security council wants fishery report on cyanide use in S. China Sea

By Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza
Reporter

THE PHILIPPINES is keen on coming up soon with its complete report on the alleged use of cyanide by Chinese fishermen encroaching Scarborough Shoal, locally known as Bajo de Masinloc.

On Monday, National Security Council (NSC) Spokesman Jonathan Malaya told a news briefing that the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) has been ordered to finish its post-mission reports and all the evidence it has gathered to the country's West Philippine Sea task force.

"We at the National Security Council are alarmed by this development that is happening, but we have to be careful also, so we have to validate and investigate [the use of cyanide by Chinese fishermen]."

In a forum last week, BFAR spokesman Nazario Briguera said Chinese fishermen have been using the deadly chemical compound in the area, 124 nautical miles off the Philippines' main northern island of Luzon.

He said the practice of foreign fishermen have caused damage potentially exceeding P1 billion. "They intentionally destroy Bajo de Masinloc to prevent Filipino fishing boats from fishing in the area," Mr. Briguera said.

In a statement, the Chinese Embassy in Manila belied the allegations of use of cyanide by its fishermen.

"The allegation against Chinese fisherman is totally baseless and sheer fabrication. China has indisputable sovereignty over Huangyan Dao and its adjacent waters," it said of Scarborough Shoal.

"The Chinese Government attaches great importance to the protection of ecological environment and conservation of fishery resources, and have taken resolute measures to crack down on any illegal fishing activities," it added.

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) had said that President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. had instructed stricter patrols in the area.

Scarborough Shoal has been a major source of tensions between the countries, with the Chinese Coast Guard preventing Filipino fishermen from accessing the fishing ground, which falls within Manila's 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone.

In mid-January, a China Coast Guard ship deployed a rubber boat to chase a small boat of Filipino fishermen collecting shells in the vicinity of the shoal.

One of the five Chinese personnel forced them to return the shells to the sea before being allowed to leave. They were subsequently driven away.

A 2016 arbitral ruling that invalidated China's expansive claims in the South China Sea recognized the traditional fishing rights of small-scale Filipino and Chinese fishermen in the shoal.

Mr. Malaya said once the report is validated, it would be sent to the Department of Justice and the Office of the Solicitor General, which are

working on a case against China for environmental degradation.

"The challenge here is to prove the responsibility for the coral degradation and the impact to the environment is coming from these specific people," he said at the Monday briefing.

"We need to connect them. We have to have solid evidence to prove so that once we file the case, we won't have a hard time proving it to the court," he said in mixed English and Filipino.

"When we go to court, we have to have solid evidence to back your claim."

ESTABLISH SEA LANES — LOCSIN

In Congress, Philippine Ambassador to the United Kingdom Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. called on the government to push for measures that would establish archipelagic sea lanes to safeguard the country's marine resources.

"Our archipelagic sea lanes must include normal passage routes or international navigation and overflight and of course innocent passage," Mr. Locsin told a Senate Maritime and Admiralty Zones committee hearing.

"They [sea lanes] should be required to show sufficient capability to put in place mechanisms that enhance maritime safety and give convincing proof that our proposals will enhance the positive impact of orderly vessel traffic," he said.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an archipelagic state such as the Philippines may designate these sea lanes to ensure the "continuous and expeditious passage" of foreign vessels and aircraft in or over its archipelagic waters.

Mr. Locsin said that the International Maritime Organization would be in-charge of adopting Philippine proposals for archipelagic sea lanes, which he said would take time to process.

"We are [one of] the only two serious archipelagos on the planet," Mr. Locsin said. "As sprawling archipelagos, we are most vulnerable in this particular aspect; our major islands are the sizes of many countries; the waterways between them offer wide approaches."

Senator Francis N. Tolentino, who heads the committee, formed technical working groups composed of officials from the Departments of Foreign Affairs (DFA), of Justice (DoJ), the NSC, the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), and the PCG.

He said the measure would likely be submitted to plenary by March.

Last year, NAMRIA said it would finish mapping Philippine territories in the South China Sea by 2028.

Mr. Tolentino has said the special committee on maritime and admiralty zones would craft a Philippine map to assert the country's claim in the South China Sea in response to China's so-called 10-dash line map.

The Philippines, Vietnam, India and Taiwan have criticized the map for covering regions beyond China's borders and claiming most of the South China Sea. — with a report from John Victor D. Ordoñez



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Clark mega food hub seen to spur farm productivity

THE mega food hub planned to rise inside the Clark Civil Aviation Complex (CCAC) by 2028, along with other flagship projects, are seen to be a "game-changer" for the Philippines's overall agricultural productivity and the "revitalization" of the country's exports sector, among others, according to the Clark International Airport Corporation (CIAC).

CIAC President Arrey Perez made the forecast after the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Agriculture (DA) inked on Monday a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the CIAC to collaborate in the development of the National Food Hub in Clark.

"The National Food Hub, in tandem with the CIAC's six other flagship projects, will be a game-changer for the Philippines' overall agricultural productivity and the revitalization of our exports sector. And key to everything is partnerships like this—where minds and wills align," Perez said.

Trade and Industry Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual told reporters on the sidelines of the MOU signing that this food hub will ensure that food waste would be reduced to avoid passing on the cost to consumers in Metro Manila.

At the grassroots level, Perez said the mega food hub will "empower" farmers, livestock growers and even fishermen.

The food hub, however, is still undergoing a feasibility study and market sensing this year. Perez said CIAC aims to award the contract to the private sector by 2025. If this timeline is followed, the CIAC chief said the construction of phase 1 of the food hub will happen from 2025 to 2028.

"Of course after the award, they will build the facility. So when they build the facility -- at least that's what we can call Phase 1 -- [it] will happen by 2025 all the way to 2028," he noted.

The CIAC said the estimated project cost for the 64-hectare Clark National Food Hub is \$152 million or P8.56 billion.

SEE "CLARK," A2



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Clark...

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As the DTI is tasked to provide assistance to encourage investments in the construction and management of the Food Hub, Pascual said foreign participants such as Rungis International Market in Paris, France and Mercabarna market in Barcelona, Spain have "expressed interest to participate [to invest in the hub]."

DTI described Rungis International Market as the largest wholesale food market in Europe and is located on the outskirts of Paris. Mercabarna is a "vital wholesale market" located in Barcelona, Spain, specializing in the distribution of fresh produce, seafood,

meat, and flowers.

Meanwhile, in the local scene, the country's "tycoons" could invest in this mega food hub, especially since a lot of conglomerates are already going into logistics "because they've already seen the importance of logistics in ensuring supply, various things not just food, but even raw materials and delivery of finished products in their manufacturing operation."

"So those are the ones we will invite as partners. They have to form consortia. In France, for example, its ownership is dispersed. The local government also has some participation. National government and then the private operators," Pascual said.

Under the MOU, the DA will lead the development of a policy framework, public investment, and support services necessary for domestic and export-oriented businesses to support the overall goals of the National Food Hub.

This includes sourcing funds needed to set up or improve cold chain facilities and food terminals that will help expand the logistics network of the Food Hub.

Meanwhile, the agreement noted that the DTI, through its Supply Chain and Logistics, Wholesale and Retail Trade Office (SCLWRTO), is "mandated to formulate policies

and measures relative to the supply chain, trade facilitation and logistics in promoting the interest of exporters, importers and traders in the shipment of commodities by helping secure competitive rates and equitable terms and conditions by carriers/transport operators and other service providers."

The agreement also mandated DTI to establish a system of accreditation of sea freight forwarders, logistics providers and multimodal operators.

The national food hub's services will include research and quality control, warehousing, food processing, international shipping, marketing services, and trading for local and foreign markets.

Other flagship projects of CIAC are the National Food Hub Gateway Road, the Clark Entertainment and Events Center, Urban Renewal and Heritage Conservation Program, CRK Direct Access Link, New CIAC Headquarters and Site Development for Second Runway.

According to CIAC, the National Food Hub Gateway Road project aims to "enhance" transportation infrastructure by upgrading the existing airport-New Clark City road to be the "dedicated" gateway to the Clark National Food Hub and "facilitate smoother access" to the Clark International Airport.

Andrea E. San Juan



Smuggled onions booming online

Smuggled and imported onions being sold online have contributed to the slump in the farmgate price of local bulbs, according to a farmers' group.

In an interview with **The STAR**, Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag) executive director Jayson Cainglet noted that illegally sourced onions are sold for as low as P25 per kilo on Facebook.

"When we reported about the decline in the farmgate price (of local red onions) to P29 per kilo on Friday, it increased to P40 to P42 per kilo, but now it went down to P28 per kilo," Cainglet said yesterday.

Onion farmers were forced to rent storage space amid the depressed farmgate price, he added.

"How can local farmers com-

pete with the smuggled and imported onions sold for as low as P25 per kilo on Facebook?" he pointed out.

Cainglet criticized the **Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI)** for failing to act on the matter, calling for a total revamp of the BPI.

The BPI allowed the importation of 21,000 metric tons of onions, with at least 99 MT of imported bulbs entering the country between Jan. 1 and Jan 15 despite the Dec. 31, 2023 deadline.

Onion production is expected to increase this year as more farmers planted onions, Cainglet said.

"Many onion farmers have started harvesting and they will not be affected by the El Niño," he said.

Farmers were encouraged to

plant as the farmgate price averaged between P50 and P90 per kilo during the peak harvest in 2023, he added.

Onion farmers are incurring losses with the P28 per kilo farmgate price as the production cost is already P30 per kilo, he noted.

The retail price in Metro Manila markets remains high despite a slump in the farmgate price of onions.

Based on the **Department of Agriculture's** monitoring, the retail price of local red onions ranged between P70 and P150 per kilo; local white onions, between P65 and P100 per kilo; imported red onions, between P90 and P100 per kilo and imported white onions, between P80 and P120 per kilo. — **Bella Cariaso**



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NEWS BRIEF

BFAR binoldyak ng Pamalakaya

HINDI dapat hinahayaan ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources ang mga barko ng China nakawin ang yamang-dagat ng bansa at dapat nitong komprontahin ang mga ito.

Sabi ng Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamalakaya ng Pilipinas kahapon, dapat gamitin ng BFAR ang batas ng Pilipinas para panagutin ang mga barko ng China para hindi ito mamihasa.

"Hindi dapat nagtatagal ang kawalang aksiyon ng pamahalaan sa laganap na presensya ng mga barkong pangisda at mapanirang aktibidad nito sa ating karagatan dahil mayroong batas laban sa pang-ingisda ng mga dayuhan," giit ng Pamalakaya.

Nag-annunsiyo man ang BFAR na regular na itong magpapatrolya sa Panatag Shoal, huli na ito at malawak na ang pinsalang nagawa ng China sa mga bahura at pangisdaan ng Pilipinas.

"Kailangang kaakibat na ng pagpapatrulya ang pagpapataw ng parusa sa mga dayuhang ilegal na nangingisda. Matagal nang alam at inuulat ng mga mangingisdang Pilipino ang paggamit ng Chinang sodium cyanide para mabilis na palabasin sa lungga ang magagandang klaseng isda tulad ng pugita, lapu-lapu, lobster at iba pa. Bukod pa sa layunin nitong sadyang sirain ang mga bahura para hindi na balikan ng mga isda at mga Pilipinong mangingisda," sabi ng Pamalakaya. (Eileen Mencias)

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Paggamit ng cyanide ng China iniimbestigahan

Inatasan ng National Security Council (NSC) ang Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) na beripikahin ang sumbong ng mga Pilipinong mangingisda na gumagamit ng cyanide ang mga mangingisdang chinese sa Bajo de Masinloc.

Sa Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon, sinabi ni NSC Asst. Director General Jonathan Malaya na inatasan na nila BFAR na kumpletuhin ang kanilang report tungkol sa bagay na ito, at isumite sa Task Force on West Philippine Sea.

Ayon kay Malaya, mahalagang maimbestigahan at ma-validate ang impormasyong ito.

Kapag napatunayan umano na totoo ito ay maaari itong ipasa sa Department of Justice (DOJ) at Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) na gumagawa ng mga hakbang para mapalakas ang mga kaso sa international tribunal.

Sabi ni Malaya, ang hamon ngayon ay mapatu-

nayan ang pagkasira ng coral reefs sa WPS at matukoy na kagagawan nga ito ng mga mangingisdang Chinese.

Binigyang diin ng opisyal na mahalagang may solidong ebidensya laban sa kanila para tumayo ang kaso sa korte. (Gemma Garcia)



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EDITORIAL

Food security amid El Niño

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.

El Niño is now exhaling its hissing heat – as high as 40 degrees Celsius in Metro Manila and northern Luzon – with weather authorities saying high temperatures would prevail despite the northeast monsoon.

El Niño task force spokesman Joey Villarama said as early as last month “we were already experiencing a strong and mature El Niño (and) there is no quantitative measure of what a strong and mature El Niño is, but let’s say it should be cold now, but it’s already quite warm.”

It is a source of comfort 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 this month.

Villarama has told a news forum 41 provinces are currently affected by the weather phenomenon and 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.



Officials stress the importance of monitoring vulnerable populations, like children and senior citizens, for heat-related illnesses like heat stroke and skin problems

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

This is where the government’s fiscal measures will come in.

It is also comforting the Department of Health is monitoring waterborne and vector-driven diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, dengue, and chikungunya – but none thus far has been recorded.

Officials have reported significant damage to rice and corn crops in Regions 6 (Western Visayas) and 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula), totaling around P151 million but underlined that some 4,000 farmers in these regions have received assistance.

Beneficiaries got “qualitative support” like heat-tolerant seeds for farmers, social protection for domestic animals and ongoing efforts to repair irrigation canals.

The Task Force has its focus on monitoring food security, water supply, power supply, health concerns and potential price increases as part of directives from President Marcos, since the extreme heat could spawn health concerns, especially waterborne diseases due to inadequate supply of clean water supply.

We are one with officials who stress the importance of monitoring vulnerable populations, like children and senior citizens, for heat-related illnesses like heat stroke and skin problems.

We are also reading the bulletin board of PAGASA which says 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.

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.

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So, you bought a small farm?

Lately, I had conversations with several friends who bought small farm lots in Tanay, Siniloan, and Naic who still did not know what to do with these farms except build a rest house. Curious, I opened the free version of Gemini (formerly Bard) and asked: "I am a retired government employee. I own a hectare of land that used to be planted to rice. The lot is near a main road. There are adjoining lots that can, with an agreement with the owners, be organized into a farming cooperative. What are the options for contributing to people-planet-profit available to me?"

Here's what Gemini has to say:

"That's fantastic! Here are some options to consider, taking advantage of your location and potential cooperative efforts:

"People—(1) Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Partner with local communities to offer weekly subscriptions of fresh, seasonal produce grown on your land. This provides nutritious food directly to consumers and fosters connection between farmers and communities; (2) Educational programs: Organize workshops and farm tours to educate people about sustainable agriculture practices and healthy food choices; (3) Agrotourism: Offer farm visits, cooking classes, or farm-stay experiences to generate income and connect people with the source of their food.

"Planet—(1) Regenerative agriculture: Implement practices that improve soil health and biodiversity, such as cover cropping, composting, and minimal tillage. This helps sequester carbon, conserve water, and create a healthier ecosystem; (2) Integrate diverse crops: Grow a variety of fruits, vegetables, and legumes alongside other plants like nitrogen-fixing trees to create a more resilient and resource-efficient system; (3) Reduce waste and pollution: Implement composting, rainwater harvesting, and natural pest control methods to minimize environmental impact.



ON THE MOVE

SEGUNDO ECLAR ROMERO

"Profit—(1) Direct sales: Sell your produce directly to consumers through farmers' markets, farm stands, or online platforms; (2) Value-added products: Process your harvest into jams, pickles, or other products to increase profit margins and extend shelf life; (3) Collaborate with restaurants or chefs: Partner with local businesses for consistent sales and to showcase the quality of your produce; (4) Form a cooperative: Joining forces with neighboring farmers can provide economies of scale, shared resources, and better market access.

My follow-up prompt goes: "This Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a good idea! Is there such a farm within or adjacent to Metro Manila I can visit? Please give references."

Gemini replies: "That's wonderful to hear! Here are a few options:

"1. Urban Greens Hydroponics Farm (Cainta, Rizal). This farm uses hydroponic technology to grow a variety of leafy greens, herbs, and microgreens indoors. They offer CSA memberships with weekly deliveries of fresh produce directly to your doorstep; +63 917 817 8282.

"2. Good Food Community (multiple locations). This organization partners with smallholder farmers in various provinces to deliver fresh, organic produce to subscribers in Metro Manila through a CSA model. They

offer different box sizes and delivery options to cater to individual needs. <https://www.goodfoodcommunity.com/>; +63 2 887 8899.

"3. The Farm at San Benito (San Benito, Laguna). This farm is located within a wellness resort and offers a CSA program that provides subscribers with a mix of seasonal fruits, vegetables, herbs, and flowers. They also offer farm tours and educational workshops. <https://www.thefarm.com.ph/>; +63 49 545 9500.

"4. Real Food Share (multiple locations). This organization operates several urban farms in Metro Manila and offers CSA memberships with weekly deliveries of fresh, seasonal produce grown using sustainable practices. They also have a strong focus on community engagement and education; +63 2 807 9020.

"5. The Green Thumb Project (multiple locations). This organization offers vertical farming kits and workshops to help individuals and communities grow their food in urban spaces. They also operate a CSA program in partnership with local farmers; +63 917 828 6288.

For researchers, I continued the conversation with these prompts, each one giving me a wealth of leads, to be checked, of course. Try them!

(1) "I am interested in doing a study to survey the smart farming initiatives in the Philippines undertaken by the government, private sector, and communities (people's organizations, cooperatives, NGOs). Please give me a research design, focus group discussion questions, and tips for a successful study. Please provide references. (2) I will be doing snowball sampling for smart farming initiators in the government, private sector, and communities in the Philippines. Please give me an initial list of possible key informant interviewees and survey respondents. Please give me references."

I am so enthused! I don't own a hectare of farmland so I'll share with my friends.

doyromero@gmail.com



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Helping put food on the people's table strengthens me, nourishes my soul, Bulacan farmer says

By **FREDDIE VELEZ**

A small farmer from Bulacan said planting vegetables that end up being consumed in the Filipino family's dining table strengthens his body and nourishes his soul.

"Hindi lahat kaming magsasaka ay puspusang nagsikap sa aming trabaho upang kumita lamang ng pera, gusto rin naming makatulong sa iba dahil naniniwala kami na ang pagtulong sa kapwa ay isa sa nagpapalusog ng ating katawan at utak, kaya mas madaming matutulungan, lalo kang lal-akas (Tilling our lands is not just for profit but more to help Filipinos become healthy because if one is healthy in mind and body, he will be able to help more people)," said Ferdinand "Biden" Benedicto.

Benedicto said planting different kinds of vegetables for almost ten years now on a one-hectare land stimulates him. He even gives away some of his vegetables for free to those who need them.

"Tapos na ng pag-aaral ang mga anak



SHARE YOUR BLESSINGS — Ferdinand 'Biden' Benedicto of Barangay San Vicente, Sta Maria, Bulacan (Freddie Velez)

ko at may mga hanapbuhay na sila, ang isa kong anak ay nasa bangko nagtatrabaho bilang isang accountant, kaya ang nais ko ngayon sa buhay ay maging biyaya naman sa ibang tao," (My children have already graduated and now have jobs, one of them is working as a bank accountant. All I wish for is to become a blessing to other people.)

"Hindi lang dapat sa tuwing mayroong okasyon at holiday lamang ang pamimigay ng blessing sa kapwa kundi araw-araw at walang pinipili," (You don't share your blessings only during special occasions or holidays. You do it every day) he said.

Benedicto also believes that by helping others, the malady of depression is lessened.

"Kailanman, ang aking gulayan ay hindi ko iniisip na pag-aari ko lamang kundi pag-aari naming lahat na mga magkakapitbahay," (I have always believed that my vegetable farm is not mine alone but the entire community's.)

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DOJ: Earnings from coconut levy assets should benefit farmers

By JEFFREY DAMICOG

Dividends and proceeds in the use of the multi-billion-peso coconut levy assets by government-owned and -controlled corporations (GOCCs) should be remitted to the Coconut Farmers and

Industry Trust Fund for the benefit of farmers, the Department of Justice (DOJ) said.

In a five-page legal opinion dated Feb. 12, DOJ Undersecretary Raul T. Vasquez, on behalf of Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin C. Remulla, stated that "the ► 8

DOJ: Earnings from coconut levy assets should benefit farmers 1◀

dividends and/or proceeds of the GOCCs forming part of the Coconut Levy Assets shall be transmitted to the Trust Fund in accordance with the provisions of Republic Act No. 11524."

Vasquez cited that RA 11524, the Coconut Farmers and Industry Fund Act, states that: "[A]ll Coconut Levy Assets xxx shall be transferred to the Trust Fund for the benefit of the coconut farmers."

"The Trust Fund, specially created under RA No. 11524, shall be maintained in such manner for 50 years under the Coconut Farmers and Industry Development Plan and shall be used for the benefit of the coconut farmers and the development of the coconut industry," he explained.

The DOJ issued the legal opinion to Undersecretary Catherine L. Fong of the Privatization and Corporate Affairs Group and trust fund manager.

Fong sought a clarification of the DOJ's May 31, 2023 legal opinion which stated that United Coconut Chemicals, Inc. (CocoChem) and the Coconut Industry Investment

Fund-Oil Mill Group (CIIF-OMG) are GOCCs and required to remit at least 50 percent of their reported net earnings to the national government (NG), through the Bureau of Treasury (BTr), pursuant to RA 7656, the Dividends Law.

She told the DOJ that during the 13th Trust Fund Management Committee (TFMC) meeting held on Oct. 3, 2023, it was determined that the remittance of the dividends of CocoChem to the national government could reduce CocoChem's selling price and should be used as investment and earn additional income.

Vasquez said "CocoChem and the CIIF-OMG, as part of the Coconut Levy Assets, are corporations or properties acquired through the Coconut Levy Fund, which are generated from levies, taxes, charges, and other fees exacted or imposed pursuant to or in connection with the sale of copra rececada or its equivalent in other coconut products, and collected for the most part from coconut farmers, planters, millers, refiners, proces-

sors, exporters, desiccators, and other end-user of copra rececada or its equivalent in other coconut products.

"Applying the principle of generalia specialibus non derogant (general things do not derogate from specific things) wherein a general law does not nullify a special law - the general law will yield to the special law in specific and particular subject matter in the latter. RA No. 11524 was enacted to consolidated the benefits due to coconut farmers under various statutes and expedite its delivery; RA 7656, on the other hand, seeks to realize additional revenues for the National Government by requiring GOCCs to share a substantial amount of their net income," Vasquez explained.

Fong also asked the DOJ if the TFMC, through the Trust Fund Manager (TFM), can withhold remittance of dividends and proceeds of disposition to improve the sale of coconut levy assets.

To this, Vasquez said: "Defer to the TFM to set any investment strategy necessary and proper for the Coco Levy Assets in furtherance of the benefit that may accrue to the coconut farmers and the whole coconut industry."



Clark also being eyed as mega food complex

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Agriculture (DA) have partnered with Clark International Airport (CIAC) to collaborate in the development of a mega food hub in Clark City.

The parties signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) yesterday on the collaborative support for the development of the national food hub.

The Clark National Food Hub is a 64-hectare agriculture trading hub inside the Clark Civil Aviation Complex (CCAC) that will support the administration's vision to make the Philippines a leading agricultural resource hub in the region and the world.

The P8.5-billion food hub is also designed to be the Philippines' premium wholesale market and distribution hub for quality food produce.

According to the DTI, the MOU aims to enhance food security, empower farmers and the private sector, strengthen supply chain and logistics systems and facilitate infrastructure development.

The DTI said it would lead initiatives related to supply chain and trade facilitation.

It will also be providing assistance to encourage investments in the construction and management of the food hub, and is expected to play a big role in promoting market and logistics linkage between producers and institutional buyers.

"This MOU will accelerate the government's efforts to make food available, accessible, and more affordable to the consuming public. The DTI expresses its full

commitment to this initiative given our two-pronged objectives to ensure logistics efficiency, and expand food exports," Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual said.

For its part, the DA will lead the development of a policy framework, public investment and support services necessary for domestic and export-oriented businesses to support the overall goals of the Clark National Food Hub. This includes the efforts of sourcing the necessary budgets for the establishment or improvement of cold chain facilities and food terminals that will help expand the logistics network of the food center.

Pascual said the project harnesses the mandate and resources of the three government agencies. He added that the Public Private Partnership (PPP) Center has generously committed to provide the transaction advisory services to accelerate the feasibility study and bidding activities of the Hub.

"With the technical support from the USAID through its RESPOND Project, we can achieve the President's goal of ensuring food security by empowering farmers and the private sectors, as well as strengthening supply chain and logistics systems and infrastructure development," Pascual said.

CIAC president and CEO Arrey Perez expressed gratitude for the support of the DTI and DA as well as other institutional partners.

"We are making much headway with the PPP Center in completing the project preparation stages, and working around the clock to identify key investors, major food conglomerates, and other private sector partners so we can break ground at the soonest possible time. The National Food Hub, in tandem with the CIAC's six other flagship projects, will be a game-changer for the Philippines' overall agricultural productivity and the revitalization of our exports sector. And key to everything is partnerships like this - where minds and wills align," Perez said.



Phl, Canada to strengthen agri, tourism partnerships

By GHIO ONG

The Philippines and Canada will boost agriculture and tourism partnerships as they celebrate 75 years of diplomatic ties.

In the coming days, the Indo-Pacific Agricultural and Agri-Food Office will be inaugurated in Manila as part of the commemoration, Philippine Ambassador to Canada Maria Andrelita Austria told **The STAR** yesterday.

"(The office is) a sign of our long-term commitment in the Indo-Pacific, along with the importance we play upon Canada's reputation as a stable and trusted supplier for agriculture, agri-food and seafood products," the Canadian government said in a statement.

Top government officials and agriculture industry executives from Canada will visit the Philippines to mark the anniversary of diplomatic relations, with a planned fair featuring Canada's seafood products, Austria said.

The Philippine embassy in Canada has come up with programs that would "recreate the Filipino experience through our food and destinations" such as Filipino Restaurant Month, food truck events and cultural shows in parts of Canada, she added.

The two countries also signed security and tourism agreements.



Filipino-Canadian participants of the Very Important Pinoy tour program take a group photo with Manila Vice Mayor Yul Servo, after a wreath-laying ceremony at the Rizal monument in Rizal Park yesterday.

VIP tour

Meanwhile, the embassy is holding in its eighth year the "Very Important Pinoy" or VIP Tour program organized by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Tourism and the Tourism Promotions Board and implemented by Rajah Tours Corp.

Around 270 residents of various provinces in Canada – mostly Filipino migrants – will join the week-long tour of destinations in Iloilo City, Guimaras, Cebu City and Bohol.

More first-time visitors and second-generation members of Filipino families – or sons and daughters, even grandchildren, of Filipino migrants – will take part in the tours this year.

The VIP Tour began yesterday, with a wreath-laying ceremony at the Rizal monument in Rizal Park followed by tours in Intramuros and Chinatown.

With a tourist spending an average of \$7,000 during the tour, Austria hopes the tour program will help generate more income and investment opportunities for Filipinos at home.

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Farmers representation at coco trust fund sought

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) has asked the Department of Finance (DOF) to appoint a panel of coconut farmers' representatives that can advise members of the Trust Fund Management Committee (TFMC).

The TFMC decides on the disposition of coco levy funds and assets after the enactment of the Coconut Farmers and Industry Trust Fund Act of 2021 also known as Republic Act (RA) 11524.

The TFMC is comprised of the DOF secretary as chairman and fund manager with the secretaries of the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Budget and Management as members.

"The TFMC decides on the disposition of coconut levy funds and assets. It also determines the yearly funding allocation out of the P100 billion trust fund levy collections for the various proj-

ects and support services to be extended to coconut farmers and their organizations," said Leonardo Montemayor, FFF chairman, in a statement.

FFF made the appeal for farmer representation after the DOJ issued an opinion stating that dividends and other proceeds from coconut levy-sourced assets should be remitted directly to the trust fund established by RA 11524 instead of to the national government.

The DOJ said its ruling also applies to the United Coconut Chemicals Inc. and the Coconut Industry Investment Fund-Oil Mills Group, among others.

Montemayor said the original capitalization of the two companies was sourced from coconut levies imposed on farmers between 1973 and 1982.

FFF said in 2021, several groups have asked then DOJ

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Slipping. Coconut production slipped 0.26 percent in 2023 to 14.89 million metric tons (MT) from 14.93 million MT in 2022.

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FARMERS

Secretary Carlos Dominguez III to include an advisory council of coconut producers' representatives in the crafting of the implementing rules and regulations governing

the TFMC.

Montemayor said the request was not granted.

The Philippines is the world's second largest coconut producer

next to Indonesia but is the world's top exporter, shipping around 70 percent of output. Products include crude and refined coconut oil, desiccated coconut, copra

meal and coconut water.

Despite stable export growth, the coconut industry continues to suffer from declining farm yield that started in 2010 due to infestation and

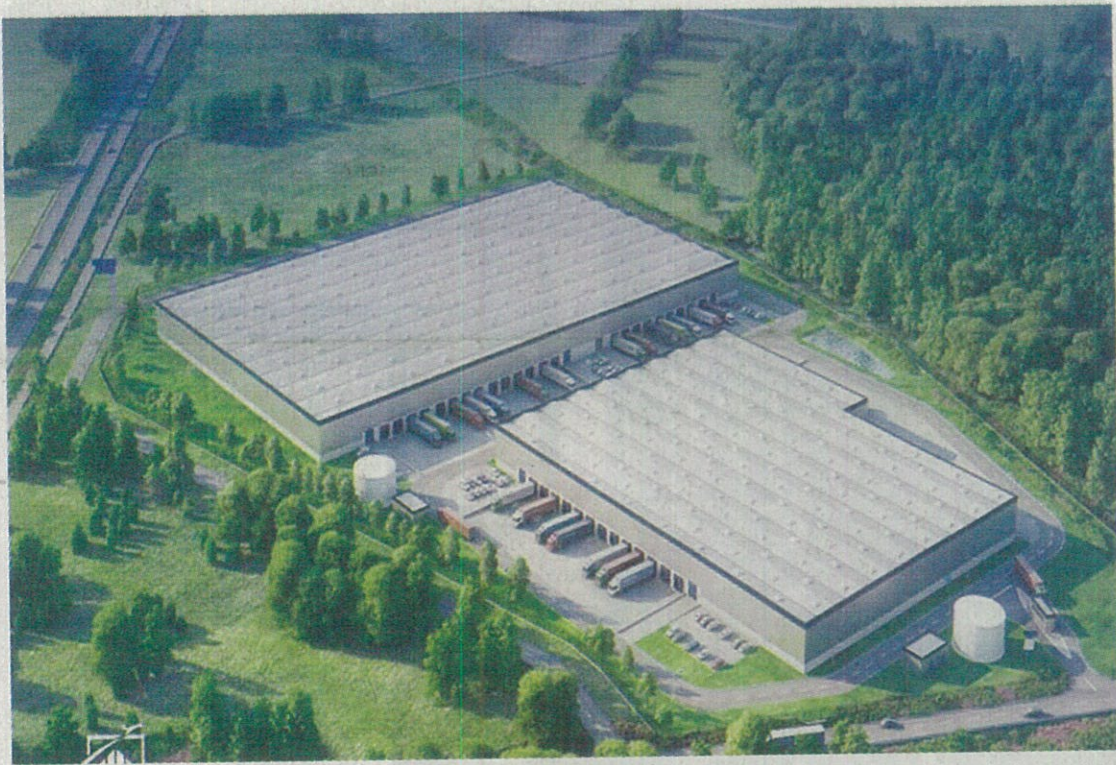
major typhoons, low investments, limited research and development and poor infrastructure.

Based on data from the Philippine Statistics Authority, coconut

production slipped 0.26 percent to 14.89 million metric tons (MT) for husked (young and mature) in 2023 from 14.93 million MT in 2022.



P8.5B food hub attracts French, Spanish firms



Artist's render of the national food hub, a 64-hectare complex that would help ensure food supply while reducing wastage due to logistics concerns. (CIAC Photo)

BY IRMA ISIP

THE government is inviting foreign and local companies to invest in the P8.5 billion 64-hectare mega food hub being planned in the aviation complex in Clark.

The project has initially earned the interest of operators of France's Rungis and Spain's Mercado.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department of Agriculture yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Clark International Airport Corp. (CIAC) for this public-private-partnership project set for bidding within the year.

DTI Secretary Alfredo Pascual said Rungis, which manages a

wholesale food market in France, has made studies and has been encouraging the Philippines to develop a similar project.

Pascual said the government will invite local conglomerates as most of the tycoons have been going into logistics to ensure stable food supply.

"We will invite them, they can form a consortium," he said.

Pascual said the hub will be more than a "bagsakan" but will accommodate processing including slaughterhouses, canning among other facilities.

Arrey Perez, CIAC president, said the terms of reference for the project will be prepared for the public tender after the conduct of a feasibility study by the PPP

Center and the Asian Development Bank.

Perez said the project is targeted for award in 2025 using the PPP model of design-finance-build-operate-maintain.

"The private sector will build the hub and we will value our contribution such as the land and the government assistance and regulations," Perez said.

He said a market mission locally and internationally will be conducted starting this month.

"This project supports food sustainability and raises the standard of food preparation while modernizing agriculture logistics. This will allow farmers and livestock growers to become more competitive," Perez said.



No letup in gov't aid to farmers affected by El Niño

THE Marcos administration is continuously providing assistance to farmers affected by the El Niño phenomenon in Western Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, and other regions.

Presidential Communications Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama, the spokesman for the Task Force El Niño, said there are almost 4,000 farmers affected by the dry spell in the two regions.

"Mas qualitative po, binibigyan sila ng seeds na heat tolerant, binibigyan din ng domestic animals, may social protection, may financial aid although as I said I don't know how much pero tuluy-tuloy po iyan," Villarama said in a news forum on Saturday.

"Tapos bukod sa direct interventions for them, in-aayos din po iyong mga irrigation canals pati iyong equipment themselves para matulungan po iyong mga greatly-affected farm-



ers," he said.

According to Villarama, the 41 provinces identified to be affected by El Niño have been receiving interventions from the government.

Among the problems include damage to agriculture or difficulty obtaining water, he said, noting that among the support include provisions of seeds and heat-tolerant crops.

"So, lahat po ng 41 provinces na naitala as of this time na apektado tinutulungan naman po ng Inter-Agency Task Force," Villarama said.

Villarama said most of the provinces experiencing drought are in Luzon and already received interventions from the National Irrigation Administration and Department of Agriculture.

PCO



Indonesia steps up wheat imports

SINGAPORE/JAKARTA- Indonesian grain buyers are boosting imports of lower quality wheat, as a decline in corn output last year following a severe drought linked to an El Nino weather pattern tightened the country's animal feed supplies.

Wheat imports into Indonesia, the world's No.3 buyer of the grain, are likely to climb at least 10 percent in 2024 from around 10.87 million metric tons last year, according to Singapore-based grain traders.

"Indonesia millers have been buying larger volumes of wheat mainly from the Black Sea region," a Singapore-based trader at an international house said. "Some of the wheat is of lower quality and it is expected to be used in animal feed."

Indonesian importers have signed contracts to buy around 300,000 metric tons of lower quality wheat in recent weeks, largely from Ukraine and Russia, at \$260-\$270 per ton, including cost and freight, for February-March shipment, traders said.

"These deals are for prompt shipments," a second trader said in Singapore, underscoring the urgency to ship cargoes amid tight feed grain supplies.

"For flour, Indonesian buyers usually sign deals two to three months in advance. These shipments are for feed industry as local corn prices are more than double the price of imported wheat," the trader said.

Locally produced corn is currently quoted at around \$550-\$600 per metric ton, compared with imported feed wheat priced around



A worker piling up sacks of wheat flour onto a ship at Sunda Kelapa harbor in Jakarta. (Reuters Photo)

\$260-\$270 a ton, traders said.

The National Food Agency's price monitoring website showed average corn prices for chicken farmers on Monday at 8,700 rupiah (\$0.5566) per kilogram, about 47 percent higher than a year ago.

"This is due to El Nino and prolonged drought that occurred in the second half of 2023, which delayed corn planting," said Desianto Budi Utomo, chairman of the Indonesian Feedmills Association.

"It is estimated that corn production in the first quarter of 2024 would not be optimal to meet feed mill demand."

Corn prices are more than 70 percent above government reference levels, which are likely to push up egg and chicken prices.

Some small farmers have started culling birds, officials said, which could tighten poultry supplies ahead of the Muslim holy festival of Ramadan in March.

On Monday, Indonesia assigned procurement company Bulog to import 500,000 tons of corn to supply feed millers in an effort to cool prices, although traders said that was unlikely to reduce wheat purchases given the high level of feed prices.

Higher Indonesian demand

for imported wheat comes amid ample global supplies, with the Chicago benchmark down more than 10 percent in 2024 and in negative territory for a second year in a row.

Indonesia's corn production is forecast to rise 8.3 percent to 14.58 million tons in 2024, according to officials, after drought last year reduced output by 12.5 percent from 16.53 million tons in 2022.

Indonesia tightly controls corn imports to protect farmers, while wheat shipments are allowed more freely as the country meets flour demand through imports. -Reuters