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Ailing seaweed industry crying for support -- DA

By Joel dela Torre

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has underscored the need to increase support for local seaweed producers to regain its status as the world's biggest exporter.

Seaweed at present, is the country's second biggest export earner in the Philippine aquaculture — next only to the tuna industry.

According to DA Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr., Indonesia had already surpassed the Philippines in terms of seaweed production.

In 1990, the Philippines accounted for 80 percent of the world's seaweed requirement while Indonesia only produced 10 percent.

That has since changed. Indonesia now produces five times more than the



Philippines.

During a recent meeting with seaweed industry stakeholders, Laurel said there is still room to get back as the globe's top exporter of the product by helping boosting the local industry.

"Indonesia already surpassed our production . . . but we still have unutilized area of 85,000 hectares. Until we reach that,

we shouldn't stop. If possible, we should accelerate the industry's area expansion," he stressed.

Secretary Laurel said that the lack of seedlings and limited support, which were among the major concerns raised by industry leaders could be addressed by having bigger tissue culture laboratories and more technicians.



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DA declares Benguet free from avian flu

By Othel V. Campos

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has declared the province of Benguet free from avian influenza, two years after the initial case of the H5N1 strain infection was detected in the province.

The towns of Atok, Buguias, Itogon, La Trinidad, Sablan, and Tublay and the City of Baguio previously reported cases of H5N1 strain infections in layer and native chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese, between February and September 2022.

The DA immediately ordered the culling of infected fowls and imposed sanitation measures that include cleaning and disinfection, mobility restrictions, and surveillance in the affected as well surrounding farms.

Stricter biosecurity controls protected the rest of the fowl population urging the DA to lift the ban and declare Benguet free from the dreaded avian disease.

The Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) continues to monitor 9 provinces afflicted with bird flu. These are the provinces of Bulacan, Pampanga, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, Laguna, Sultan Kudarat, Kalinga, Cagayan, and Bataan, the DA also said.

As of Feb. 9, 2024, the BAI said 66 municipalities in 10 provinces are affected by bird flu.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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EMBASSY SLAMS 'BASELESS' ALLEGATION VS CHINESE FISHERS

MARCOS: BUILD CASE OVER CYANIDE USE IF THERE'S ENOUGH PROOF

By Julie M. Aurelio
and Dona Z. Pazzibugan
@Team_Inquirer

President Marcos on Tuesday said he would support the filing of a case in connection with the alleged use of cyanide in Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) "if there is enough ground to do so."

The Chinese Embassy in Manila issued a statement also on Tuesday describing as "sheer fabrication" an earlier claim by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) that Chinese fishermen use cyanide to "intentionally destroy Bajo de Masinloc."

There was no reference to those fishermen by Mr. Marcos

or the media during his ambush interview with them, but he said, when asked by reporters about "cyanide fishing" that "If we feel that there is enough ground to do so, we will [pursue charges]."

"I do know that there are cases of cyanide fishing, even before, here in the Philippines. But I think the reason that it has been more alarming is that it has become more prevalent," he added.

'Slanders'

On Monday, Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya of the National Security Council said the Philippines will build a case on environmental destruction once BFAR validates the al-

legation of cyanide use.

Nazario Briguera, spokesperson for BFAR, said over the weekend that his claim of cyanide use at Bajo de Masinloc was based on accounts of Filipino fisherfolk.

But the Chinese Embassy said on Tuesday that "the allegation against Chinese fishermen is totally baseless and sheer fabrication."

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

The embassy criticized the

"groundless speculations, slanders and inconsistent statements of spokespersons of relevant Philippine agencies."

"Such continuous disinformation has led up to nothing but exacerbation of the maritime tensions and destabilization of bilateral relations," the embassy said, even as it asserted that "China has indisputable sovereignty" over the shoal and its adjacent waters.

BFAR draws flak

Meanwhile, fisherfolk group Pamalakaya issued a statement on Tuesday saying that BFAR had "failed" to enforce the law, in particular, Republic Act No. 10654, or the Amended Fisheries Code, in going after Chinese

fishermen at Bajo de Masinloc.

"Despite the evident poaching and other destructive fishing activities of foreign fishing vessels in the country's territorial waters, the BFAR continues to fail to implement its own fishing laws to protect the marine resources and Filipino fisherfolk," the group said.

"With the wide area of shoals destroyed by China and other countries in the West Philippine Sea, a big amount of payment for damages could already be collected for these ... to help Filipino fisherfolk whose catch [has] dropped because of the destroyed fishing grounds," it said further. —WITH A REPORT FROM JACOB LAZARO INQ



Adjust 4Ps cash aid to inflation—Marcos

By Julie M. Aurelio
@JMAurelioINQ

President Marcos has tasked three government agencies to look into automatically adjusting the cash assistance given to beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) based on inflation or the rise in prices of goods and services.

In a press briefing at Malacañang on Tuesday, Social Welfare Secretary Rex Gatchalian said Mr. Marcos ordered his agency, along with the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and National Economic and Development Authority to immediately devise a means to adjust government aid and grants according to prevailing inflation rates.

"He wanted us to find ways so as not to diminish or decrease the value of financial assistance or grants that we give to our poor countrymen. The economic team is doing all it can to slow inflation, but we should also protect the peso value of the grants we give to our 4Ps beneficiaries and other social protection programs," Gatchalian said.

He added that they were told to work together to "find the best index to make sure that the 4Ps grants and other social protection we do will not be left behind if inflation rises."

"It's not only deemed timely but it's also being responsive in making sure it's the right amount that you need ... After this, I'm going to go back to the office,



Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

run our numbers with the data crunchers, and pass it to the PSA. Hopefully, we can incorporate each other's ideas in the fastest possible time," Gatchalian said.

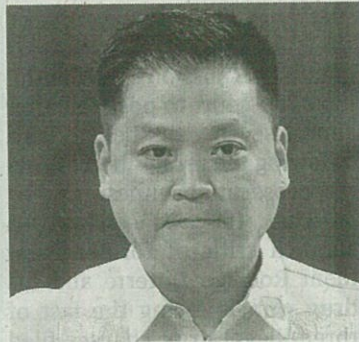
Grants given to 4Ps beneficiaries are fixed under Republic Act No. 11310 or the 4Ps Act, and any increase will need to be recommended by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and enacted into a new law by Congress.

20-percent hike

The Philippine Institute for Development Studies recommended last year an increase of 20 percent, noting that the maximum annual amount of P31,200 a 4Ps household received in 2019 was only worth P14,524 in 2023 due to inflation.

The current monthly rates for health and education allowances given to beneficiaries range from P300 to P750, depending on the age of the child enrolled in school.

"The President said earlier,



Rex Gatchalian —SENATE PRIB

'First, compute first.' Find out what index is best to use, then number two, if it's okay with economic managers and he's okay with it, we can incorporate it in the 4Ps law," Gatchalian said.

"The President wanted a self-indexation mechanism ... He wanted it to be forward-looking, and not ask for permission to adjust it. He wanted it incorporated in the law, the self-adjusting mechanism," he added.

According to Gatchalian, this will take some time to work on, given that the government's economic managers suggested a number of indexes that can be used in adjusting the amount of the 4Ps cash assistance.

"Give us time to compute first. We don't want to make a mistake with the index that we will use. There are plenty of that, there's the one based on consumer price index, there's the essential basket cause. There are many ways to do it, but the more important thrust is to make it responsive and pro-

tect its value against being diminished by shocks like inflation," Gatchalian said.

He further said that the DSWD would also examine whether there was a need to do the same for its other social protection programs like the Aid to Individuals in Crisis.

'Logistically hard'

As for the Department of Agriculture's earlier suggestion to give rice instead of cash aid to 4Ps beneficiaries, Gatchalian said they were still studying it.

He explained that this may prove "logistically hard" because some beneficiaries in far-flung areas could find it difficult to receive and transport the rice subsidy.

"I told the President we will continue studying, but the President also said that it might be logistically difficult. We're not saying no, studies are ongoing but taking into account the needed logistics so that our countrymen won't have a hard time getting it," Gatchalian said.

The 4Ps is the government's conditional cash transfer program which seeks to aid families in street situations, including indigenous families and other households living below the poverty threshold. As of February, around 4.2 million households are enrolled in the anti-poverty program. Qualified for cash grants are "poor and near-poor" families that either have a pregnant mother or children younger than 18 years old. INQ



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LATEST BUREAU OF ANIMAL INDUSTRY REPORT

PROVINCES STILL AFFECTED BY BIRD FLU DOWN TO 9

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

Only nine provinces have yet to fully recover from the effects of bird flu, down from 10 provinces in six regions, according to the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI).

The bureau identified the nine provinces as Bulacan, Pampanga, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, Laguna, Sultan Kudarat, Kalinga, Cagayan and Bataan based on its tally as of Feb. 9.

The BAI said it detected a case of avian flu at a commercial duck farm in Bulacan province although it added that this would have little to no effect on other fowls.

So far, 15 provinces have been declared free from the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), with Benguet the most recent to eradicate the disease. The others are Camarines Sur, Davao del Sur, Rizal, South Cotabato, Ilocos Sur, Batangas, Capiz, Quezon, Aurora, Ilocos Norte, Pangasinan, Cotabato, Isabela and Maguindanao del Sur.

The Department of Ag-

riculture added Benguet to the list of bird flu-free provinces after the latest tests yielded negative results more than 90 days since the completion of cleaning and disinfection operations, and a monitoring period covering poultry farms.

Global guidelines

Before this, the province logged 11 confirmed cases of HPAI subtype H5N1 in Baguio City and the towns of Atok, Buguias, Itogon, La Trinidad, Sablan and Tublay in 2022.

Based on the World Organization for Animal Health's (WOAH) terrestrial animal health code, a previously uninfected country or zone may regain its bird flu-free status at least 28 days after completing a stamping-out policy and disinfecting the last affected establishment. A subsequent monitoring period should also show no new infections.

Using the WOA's rules, the BAI issued Memorandum Circular No. 25 in 2022 outlining the procedures for declaring previously infected provinces free of the virus. **INQ**



Marcos cool to rice instead of money as 4Ps aid

By HELEN FLORES

The government will still consider the proposal to give rice instead of cash aid to beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) even if President Marcos and Social Welfare Secretary Rex Gatchalian think it may be logistically difficult.

Gatchalian said the matter was tackled during a sectoral meeting with Marcos at Malacañang yesterday, which focused on strengthening the 4Ps, the conditional cash transfer program that started during the Arroyo administration.

"We always say it's logistically hard," Gatchalian told reporters when asked to comment on the recommendation of Agriculture Undersecretary Roger Navarro to have rice as assistance instead of money.

"But we continue to talk with the Department of Agriculture on how to implement this. So logistically it's hard if you think about it. We have 4.4 million beneficiaries spread across different areas in the country," Gatchalian pointed out.

He said providing rice subsidy to 4Ps beneficiaries may also go against the directive of the President to ensure speedy and convenient access to



President Marcos convenes a meeting with the Department of Social Welfare and Development and other agencies yesterday to discuss suggested reforms to the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program.

all assistance from the government.

"We're not saying no. Studies are ongoing, but taking into account the logistics that are needed so that our countrymen won't suffer," Gatchalian said.

The DSWD is also looking at distributing rice during family development sessions, which are held once a month.

Gatchalian, however, said they have to address some issues, including rice storage while waiting FDS.

"Two, because the payouts we give are two months. How will they carry that P1,200 worth of rice -these are women who usually reside in remote villages," he said.

Gatchalian said socio-economic planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan

advised them to conduct a cost analysis so the government aid would not "diminish."

Navarro earlier proposed to convert the 4Ps aid from money to rice from the National Food Authority, saying it would spare the poor from the effects of the volatile market prices since they also buy the staple using their cash grant.

To protect the poorest Filipinos from rising prices, President Marcos directed government agencies to make the 4Ps cash grants be more responsive to the effects of inflation.

He ordered the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and the DSWD to conduct a study to find the "best index" to use to adjust government cash grants.

"One of the things he tasked us to study is how not to diminish or reduce the amount of financial assistance that we give to the poor," Gatchalian said.

He said the President wanted to ensure that social protection programs are not just implemented timely, but also responsive to the challenges brought by inflation.

While economic managers are

implementing measures to tame inflation, the President ordered the agencies to come up with formula for the grants so that it can be adjusted based on the current prices and rate of inflation, Gatchalian said.

"That's the gist of the meeting: to make sure that the price index is included whether it's cost of living or price of the essential baskets," he said.

Under Republic Act 11310 or the 4Ps Act, the DSWD provides for a fixed amount of cash grants to beneficiaries.

Congress needs to pass a new law to increase the amount of cash grant under 4Ps.

Gatchalian said the President wants the study done immediately.

According to Gatchalian, the country's inflation rate for the bottom 30 percent income households was recorded at 6.7 percent in 2023.

Rice inflation hit 22.6 percent in January, its highest mark since March 2009, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

Marcos imposed a price cap on rice for a month last year to contain soaring prices.

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Marcos: PH could file cases over cyanide fishing in Scarborough

By BETHEENA UNITE

If the Philippines deems that there is "enough grounds" to file a case against those allegedly using cyanide in Scarborough Shoal, it will be compelled to do so.

This was stressed by President Marcos on Tuesday, Feb. 20, after confirming that he was aware of the alleged cyanide fishing at the Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough Shoal.

"If we feel that there is enough grounds to do so, we will," Marcos said when asked if the Philippine government would file a case against the alleged cyanide fishing done by Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen.

"The best that we know is that there really is as far as we can tell. Sabi ng BFAR talagang merong ginagamit, meron naman nagsasabi matagal nang ginagawa 'yan (According to BFAR, it is really being used, some are also saying that it has been happening for a long time now)," Marcos added.

According to National Task Force West Philippine Sea (NTF WPS) spokesperson Jonathan Malaya, the government would investigate the alleged cyanide fishing. The findings will then be forwarded to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) for the possible filing of cases before a tribunal for environmental degradation.

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'Logistically hard' to distribute rice to 4Ps beneficiaries — DSWD chief

By ELLALYN DE VERA-RUIZ

Even though discussions are still ongoing with the Department of Agriculture (DA) regarding the proposed distribution of rice aid rather than cash subsidy, Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Secretary Rex Gatchalian on Tuesday, Feb. 20 acknowledged that reaching out to millions of beneficiaries nationwide would be "logistically hard."

In order to alleviate pressure on the market when it comes to purchasing expensive rice, DA officials have suggested to President Marcos that the P600-rice subsidy provided to

Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) beneficiaries be converted into actual rice that will be supplied by the National Food Authority.

"It's logistically hard because if you think about it, our beneficiaries are spread out—4.4 million spread across different areas in the country. Sometimes in the most geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas—mountains, islands," Gatchalian said in a mix of English and Filipino in a televised Palace briefing.

"I told President Marcos, we will continue studying DA's proposal but the President also said it might be difficult logistically, so we are still going for cash subsidy distribution.

We're not saying no to actual rice distribution. Studies are ongoing but taking into account the logistics that are needed so that our beneficiaries don't have to suffer," he added.

Gatchalian pointed out that there are issues that must be resolved if they decide to give beneficiaries actual rice.

First, he said if the DSWD distributes rice during the monthly family development session (FDS), there should be a rice storage facility while beneficiaries await the next FDS.

Second, Gatchalian questioned how women who live in remote villages will be able to transport ₱1,200 worth of rice, given that the payouts are only valid for two months.

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Protect our seas, practice sustainable management

The Philippines is blessed with abundant marine resources and vast coastlines.

From the turquoise seas of Batanes in the north to the gentle waters of Tawi-Tawi in the south, a diverse array of marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves come in abundance. These habitats harbor an impressive variety of fish species, crustaceans, and mollusks.

No doubt, seafood is an integral part of Filipino culture and sustenance from the bustling markets of Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon to the tranquil fishing villages in Mindanao.

Yet, despite the country's natural advantages, the Philippines contributes a mere two percent of the total global marine produce, according to the 2024 report of global affairs think tank ODI.

The Philippines' meager contribution to the global marine produce is largely attributed to foreign poaching, poverty in fishing communities, and the decline in commercial fishing activities.

According to the ODI Report, foreign entities engaged in illegal fishing pose a significant challenge. Foreign illegal fishers exploit the country's waters, depleting fish stocks and undermining local efforts at sustainable marine management. The lack of effective enforcement exacerbates this problem, allowing unauthorized fishing activities to persist.

While the sea provides livelihood for many Filipinos, it also perpetuates poverty. Lack of social security, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare contribute to the economic struggles of fishing communities. This cycle of

poverty hampers them from investing in modern fishing practices and infrastructure.

Another factor affecting the country's marine produce is the gradual decline in commercial fishing, largely due to diminishing profits.

But all is not lost. Tuna, a prized export, may be a silver lining in the country's current predicament.

In 2021, Philippine tuna exports exceeded \$2.6 billion, making it a global leader. However, this success story is marred by challenges. Tuna exportation faced a 31.22 percent decline in the same year, outpacing the global industry average. Tuna production reached only 2.58 million metric tons.

In September last year, however, the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** reported that the Philippines was among the world's leading producers of tuna with an impressive production of over 475,000 metric tons in 2022.

With the country's abundant marine resources, including tuna, there's hope that the Philippine fishing industry can thrive and flourish.

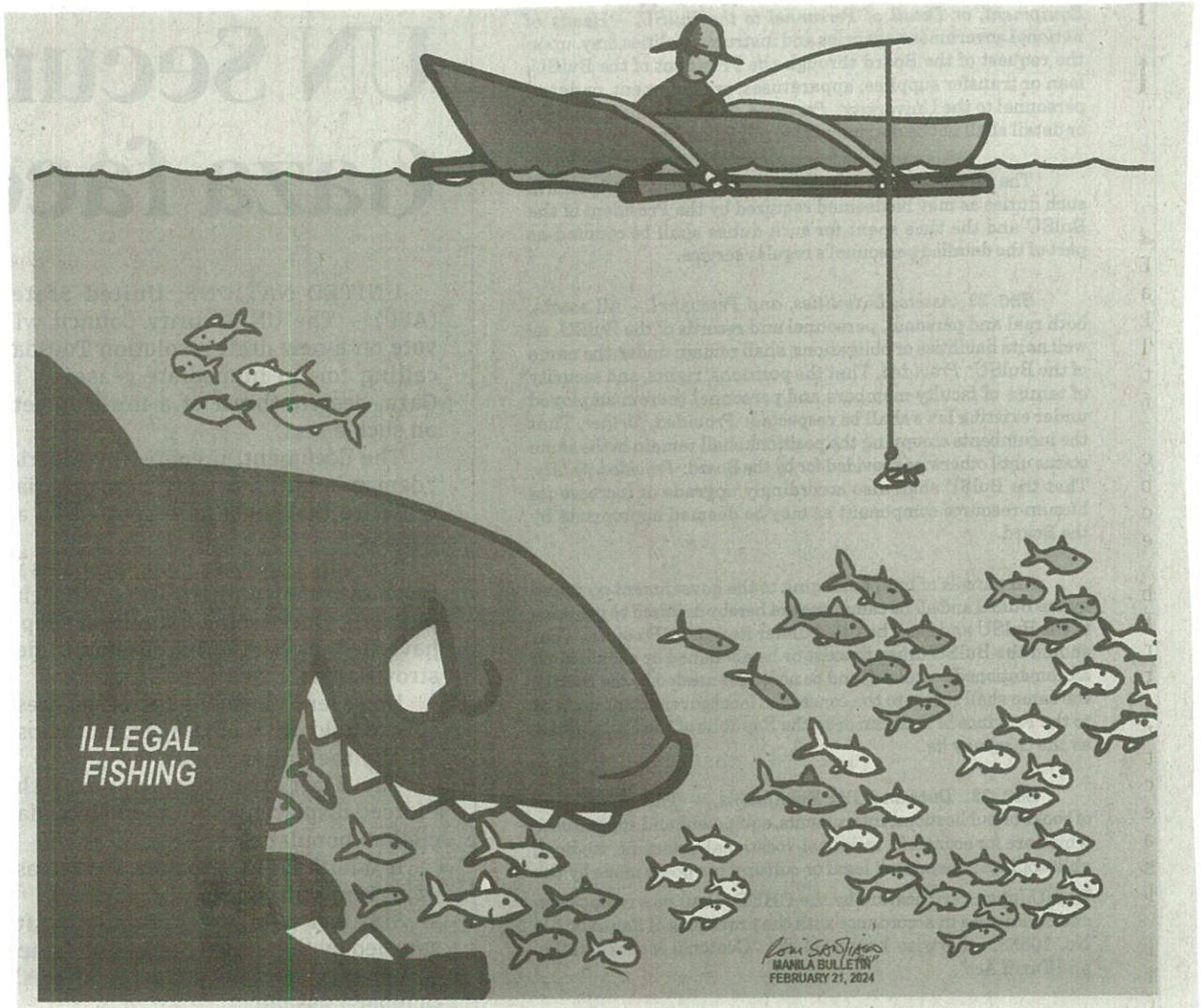
However, the country has to address illegal fishing, not only by foreign poachers but even local fishers. It is also necessary to empower coastal communities to help them improve their production and lift them out of poverty. It is likewise important that we promote and practice sustainable management. Through these efforts, we can transform our seas into a thriving resource for generations to come.

Let us safeguard our oceans to ensure that these continue to sustain us now and in the future. The responsibility falls on our shoulders.

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'Cyanide fishing more alarming'

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR
and ASHZEL HACHERO

PRESIDENT Marcos Jr. yesterday said he is aware of the alleged use of cyanide by Chinese fishermen in the past, but the latest reported incident at Bajo de Masinloc, also known as Scarborough Shoal and Panatag Shoal, is "more alarming" as it is becoming a prevalent practice

in Philippine waters.

"I do know that there are cases of cyanide fishing before even here in the Philippines, but I think the reason that it has become more alarming is that it has become more prevalent. Kaya 'yun ang inaalala natin (that is what worries us)," President said in a chance interview after the

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CYANIDE

16th Ani ng Dangal 2024 awards in Manila.

China denied its fishermen are using cyanide at Scarborough to destroy the resource-rich shoal and prevent Filipino fishermen from entering the lagoon to ply their trade.

Marcos said he has received reports from the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** about the possible cyanide fishing.

Solicitor General Menardo Guevarra yesterday said the BFAR report needs further verification, adding his office is still studying legal options available to the country against Beijing.

"The Office of the Solicitor General's task is to present legal options to the Philippine government, but the decision to commence any legal action lies with the President in consultation with the National Task Force on the West Philippine Sea. A possible complaint for environmental or marine damage is one of these options. The recent report on the use of cyanide off Scarborough Shoal, serious as it is, needs careful factual verification," Guevarra said.

The BFAR over the weekend said it has received reports that Chinese fishermen are using cyanide to "intentionally destroy" the shoal to prevent Filipinos from fishing in the area.

The National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea has ordered BFAR to gather evidence which can be used to file charges.

The President said he supports filing of charges.

"If we feel that there is an enough ground to do so, we will," he said.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning called the BFAR's claim "totally baseless and sheer fabrication."

"China has indisputable sovereignty over Huangyan Dao and its adjacent waters. 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," Mao said in a press conference in Beijing.

China claims the shoal and refers to it as Huangyan Dao.

The 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which junked Beijing's claim over the South China Sea, held that Panatag is a traditional fishing ground for Filipino, Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen, and no country can block or interfere with fishing activities. However, China refused to abide by the ruling.

Beijing has been in effective control of Scarborough Shoal since 2012 following a standoff with Manila over the area. It has deployed coast guard and maritime militia vessels and cordoned off the mouth of the shoal to prevent the entry of Filipino fishermen.

Mao accused of Manila of engaging in "continuous disinformation" that she said only exacerbated tension in the area.

"The groundless speculations, slanders and inconsistent statements of spokespersons of relevant Philippine agencies can only place their professionalism and credibility in doubt," she said.

But Mao said remains ready to meet with Manila to discuss the maritime dispute.

"We urge the relevant Philippine agencies to handle maritime issues with all seriousness, and meet the Chinese side halfway in safeguarding bilateral relations as well as peace and stability in the South China Sea," she added.

The military, meanwhile, dismissed China's claim the Philippines stirred up trouble in the South China Sea by conducting a joint air patrol with United States last Monday.

Philippine Air Force

(PAF) spokeswoman Col. Ma Consuelo Castillo said the patrol, part of a maritime cooperative activity (MCA) between the two armed forces, "is in no way directed towards any country."

"The activity is in accordance with the international rules based order, as we were operating within our territory and within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone," added Castillo.

Three FA-50 fighter jets from PAF and a B-52H bomber aircraft from the Pacific Air Forces of the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) patrolled the country's airspace, starting from west of Ilocos Sur up to the Mindoro Strait.

The air patrol was a follow-up activity to the third MCA conducted by the two countries in the West Philippine Sea (WPS)

in the South China Sea last February. The two other MCAs were conducted last month and last November.

"As far as the Philippine Air Force is concerned, our participation in this combined air patrol, which is part of the 3rd iteration of the MCA between AFP and USINDOPACOM, is part of our commitment to enhance operational jointness

and interoperability with our allies while promoting regional security and stability," said Castillo.

Military officials have said more MCAs are scheduled but did not give a number.

The Armed Forces has also conducted an MCA with the Australia, in November.

— **With Victor Reyes**



editorial

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PHL seaweed industry shows resilience amid limited govt support

HOTDOGS and toothpaste share a common ingredient: seaweed. Manufacturers of processed food products like hotdogs and hams use semi-processed seaweed, specifically carrageenan, as a thickening or binding agent. On the other hand, Spinosum seaweed is processed and employed as a whitening agent in toothpaste and other pharmaceutical uses.

Carrageenan's versatile applications have created a profitable opportunity for farmers and processors to venture into seaweed farming. The late Benson Dakay, who helmed carrageenan maker Shemberg Marketing Corp., predicted in 2011 an annual growth rate of 7 to 8 percent in demand for the product. During that period, the Philippines enjoyed the distinction of being the world's top exporter of carrageenan.

More than a decade later, Indonesia surpassed the Philippines in terms of seaweed production, according to the Department of Agriculture. (See, "PHL wants to regain status as world's top seaweed exporter," **BUSINESSMIRROR**, February 19, 2024). In 1990, the Philippines accounted for 80 percent of the world's seaweed requirement while Indonesia's share was only at 10 percent. That has since changed as Indonesia now produces five times more seaweed than the Philippines.

Despite the industry's huge potential, it is not getting the support it requires. The Seaweed Industry Association of the Philippines (SIAP) noted that support for the industry has consistently declined in recent years. (See, "Seaweed growers appeal for Palace funding support," **BUSINESSMIRROR**, September 2, 2022). From the P250-million allotment the industry received from the national government in 2012, it got a measly P40 million in 2022, according to SIAP.

SIAP said the allocation it received from the national government is merely a small portion of the \$200 million earned on average from seaweed exports. The organization emphasized that the supplementary assistance should be utilized to expand seaweed farms. SIAP also highlighted that the Philippines possesses a vast expanse of 102,000 hectares of municipal waters suitable for seaweed production, but currently, only a fraction—less than 20 percent or 17,000 hectares—is being utilized.

The 85,000 hectares that remain untapped could yield an additional 640,000 metric tons of dried seaweed. This increase in production has the potential to generate higher export revenues. Furthermore, the additional earnings would have a significant impact on employment, particularly in areas with high poverty rates. Boosting seaweed output and exports presents a feasible strategy that can bring the current administration closer to its objective of transforming the Philippines into an "export powerhouse."

The country's seaweed industry faces several challenges that hinder its growth and potential. Some of these challenges include: Declining government support, limited funding for expansion, increased competition from other countries, and the lack of infrastructure and technology. Addressing these challenges can help unlock the full potential of the Philippine seaweed industry.

In 2023, the value of seaweed and carrageenan exports experienced a decline of over 14 percent, dropping to \$299.17 million from the previous year's \$349.26 million. Despite the limited support received, the industry managed to make a significant contribution to the country's export earnings. With the right support from the national government, the private sector, and seaweed farmers, there is potential for the industry to surpass the \$1-billion milestone. By achieving this, seaweed exports could join coconuts and bananas on the list of the Philippines' leading agricultural exports.

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Govt aligning investment bid for RE, minerals, farms

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA
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THE Economic Development Group (EDG) is now aligning government efforts to bring in more critical investment on renewable energy, processing of critical minerals and agriculture.

In the EDG's fifth meeting on Monday, Office

of the Special Assistant to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs and EDG Chairperson Secretary Frederick D. Go said he wants to prevent redundancies in the government initiatives to attract more investments.

Among the highlights of the meetings was the agreements of concerned government agencies to address the bottlenecks and expedite processes for renewable

energy projects.

The agency representatives also discussed strategies for the establishment of mineral processing so the country can develop its green technologies value chains.

To help improve the country's agricultural competitiveness, the Department of Agriculture and Department of Agrarian Reform are engaged in the clustering and

consolidation of farmlands.

The said initiatives are part of the Marcos administration's efforts to ensure the country's energy and food security.

As of February 9, the Board of Investments (BOI) reported the bulk, or P398.7 billion, of the P413-billion approved investment projects were on renewable energy.

It was followed by manufacturing with P12.3 billion, administrative (P1.3 billion), agriculture (P901 million), and transportation (P847 million).



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Water supply stable amid El Niño - task force

BY ARLIE O. CALALO

TASK Force El Niño said the country has enough water supply for human consumption, irrigation and power generation despite the onslaught of the drought-inducing climate phenomenon.

It added the supply of basic commodities remained stable. "We have this steady supply of rice because of our importation and stocks in warehouses, and aside from this, the harvesting season is also about to start," said Task Force El Niño spokesman Joey Villarama in a TV interview.

He added the Department of Agriculture had reported an equally stable supply of basic commodities, including sugar, corn, chicken, pork and onion. "But again, the government is applying a scientific approach here because we don't know if the damage to crop would continue any

further," Villarama said. "We need to double our vigilance and monitoring because we don't want to be caught off guard as, again, we are up against nature." The estimated damage of the El Niño phenomenon on crops, particularly rice and corn, has reached P151 million, with Regions 6 (Western Visayas) and 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula) mostly affected. "Since this is a whole-government approach, all concerned government agencies have their respective disaster risk reduction and management offices activated down to the provincial, city and municipality, and barangay level," Villarama said.

He added the government would ensure that farmers affected by El Niño were provided assistance like alternative sources of livelihood and cash aid. "We have these instances wherein affected rice farmers were provided with domestic animals for their livelihood until they recover and plant rice again," Villarama said, adding the Department of Energy would prevent power interruptions during the El Niño period. "But again, we may reiterate that we should not be complacent; we should do our part in our own little way to conserve energy and water, among others," Villarama said.

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Beijing denies use of cyanide in Scarborough

BEIJING has dismissed as "fabrication" allegations that Chinese fishermen were using cyanide to destroy the Filipinos' fishing grounds in the Bajo de Masinloc atoll in the South China Sea.

The Philippines and China both claim Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough Shoal as part of their territory.

"This claim is sheer fabrication. China has indisputable sovereignty over Huangyan Dao (Scarborough Shoal) and its adjacent waters," said Mao Ning, China Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) on Friday said Chinese fishermen have been using cyanide to intentionally destroy the traditional fishing grounds of Filipino fishermen.

"The Chinese government attaches great importance to the protection of eco-environment and conservation of fishing resources and resolutely fights against fishing activities that violate laws and regulations," Mao said in a briefing on Monday.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila on Monday night released the transcript of Mao's briefing to local media.

➤ ScarboroughA8

"Such continuous disinformation has led up to nothing but exacerbation of the maritime tensions and destabilization of bilateral relations," the embassy said.

"The groundless speculations, slanders and inconsistent statements of spokespersons of relevant Philippine agencies can only place their professionalism and credibility in doubt," it said.

It urged the "relevant Philippine agencies to handle maritime issues with all seriousness and meet the Chinese side halfway in safeguarding bilateral relations as well as peace and stability in the South China Sea."

On Tuesday, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said the Philippines would file a case against China if there is enough evidence of cyanide fishing in the Bajo de Masinloc.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the 16th Ani ng Dangal 2024

in Manila, Marcos said: "If we feel that there is enough ground to do so, we will [file charges]."

He said he tends to believe the allegation.

"The BFAR said cyanide was really used; others say cyanide fishing has been done for a long time already. And I do know that there are cases of cyanide fishing before, even here in the Philippines," Marcos said.

What is alarming is "it has become more prevalent," the President said.

BFAR has also reported that Vietnamese fishers also use cyanide in Bajo de Masinloc.

The damage to the atoll's coral reefs from cyanide use compromises the entire marine resources, including other countries' waters, it said.

In October last year, Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla said an environmental case against China might be filed in early 2024.

"We have evidence. It's just a mat-

ter of organizing the evidence and showing it to the proper tribunal. That's the most important, that we file a case before an international tribunal about the environmental damage caused by China," Remulla had said.

He said the Philippines' position is backed by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos).

China has built artificial islands at Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef, Johnson Reef and Mischief Reef in the South China Sea to reinforce its claim.

Manila and Beijing are signatories to the Unclos, but a 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration rejected the latter's claims in the South China Sea.

China refuses to recognize the arbitral ruling.

**BERNADETTE E. TAMAYO
AND CATHERINE S. VALENTE**



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Gov't distributes farm equipment

THE PHILIPPINE Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) has distributed a total of P302 million worth of farming equipment to farmers' cooperatives and associations (FCAs) in the provinces of Bohol in Central Visayas and South Cotabato in Mindanao.

The agency said P225 million worth of machines were distributed to 26 qualified FCAs in South Cotabato, while P77.5 million worth of farming equipment went to 41 FCAs in Bohol.

"These machines are poised to modernize traditional farming methods, offering mechanized solutions to every agricultural process," a PhilMech statement said.

Among the machines distributed to farming communities were rice combine harvesters, four-wheel tractors, floating tillers, hand tractors, mobile rice mills, precision seeders, walk-behind and riding-type transplanters, combine harvesters, rice threshers, single-pass rice mills, and a recirculating dryer. —

Adrian H. Halili



Philippines to sue China if evidence shows cyanide use in Scarborough

By Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza
Reporter

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. said on Tuesday that the Philippine government would file cases against China once it is proven that Chinese fishermen had used cyanide in Scarborough Shoal, a traditional fishing ground that is well within Manila's 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone.

"If we feel that there is enough ground to do so, we will," he told reporters on the sidelines of an event in Manila.

Citing reports from Filipino fishermen, the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** last week said Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen have been using the deadly chemical compound in Scarborough Shoal.

"The best that we know is that there really is as far as we can tell. According to BFAR, it is really being used, some are also saying that it has been happening for a long time now," Mr. Marcos said.

He said it is more alarming that cyanide use has been prevalent in Philippine waters.

"I do know that there have been cases of cyanide fishing before, even here in the Philippines, but I think the reason that it has been more alarming is that it has become more prevalent," he said.

On Monday, Jonathan E. Malaya, spokesman of the National Security Council, said a national task force handling tensions in the South China Sea had ordered the fisheries bureau to gather pieces of evidence to support its claims.

Mr. Malaya said once the report is confirmed, it will be submitted to the Office of the Solicitor General and the Department of Justice "to determine if there's *prima facie* evidence of wrongdoing and who's responsible."

"Our lawyers will take it from there," he said.

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 Scarborough Shoal, which is locally known as Bajo de Masinloc.

BFAR spokesperson Nazario C. Briguera on Feb. 17 said, "the Chinese intentionally destroy Bajo de Masinloc to prevent Filipino fishing boats from fishing in the area," noting that parts of

the shoal have already been destroyed with estimated damage exceeding P1 billion.

"This destruction of coral reefs in Bajo de Masinloc is a clear case of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing," he said.

The Philippine Coast Guard's spokesman for the West Philippine Sea, Jay Tristan Tarriela, had said they didn't have "any scientific study or any evidence that would suggest that cyanide fishing in Bajo de Masinloc can be attributed to the Chinese or the Vietnamese fishermen."

Fisherfolk group Pamalakaya said recently that Filipino fishermen have long reported their Chinese counterparts' use of cyanide, adding that the Philippine government under various administrations "has taken no action to stop the destruction of the Philippine fisheries."

China has already dismissed the BFAR's claim, calling it a "sheer fabrication."

"The Chinese government attaches great importance to the protection of eco-environment and conservation of fishing resources and resolutely fights against fishing activities that violate laws and regulations," Chinese foreign

ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a Monday briefing.

The Chinese embassy in Manila, meanwhile, accused the Philippine government of "continuous disinformation," which it said has "led up to nothing but exacerbation of the maritime tensions and destabilization of bilateral relations."

Scarborough Shoal has been a major source of tensions between the countries, with the Chinese Coast Guard preventing Filipino fishermen from doing fishing activities in the area.

The shoal is 240 kilometers west of the Philippine main island Luzon and is nearly 900 kilometers from Hainan, the nearest major Chinese landmass.

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.

China has effectively controlled Scarborough, which is also claimed by several other countries, in 2012 after maintaining constant coast guard presence there, according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

Abante TONITE

MABILIS SA BALITA

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China kakasuhan sa WPS cyanide fishing

Nag-aalala si Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. sa ulat na gumagamit umano ng cyanide ang mga mang-ingisdang Chinese sa mga teritoryo ng Pilipinas sa West Philippine Sea (WPS).

Ito ay matapos ihayag ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) na gumagamit umano ng cyanide ang mga dayuhang mangingisda sa Scarborough Shoal, na sumisira rin sa

mga coral sa lugar.

Sinabi ng pangulo sa ambush interview sa kanya nitong Martes na ngayon niya lang nalaman na mayroong cyanide fishing na laganap ngayon sa WPS at nakakaalarma aniya ito.

"Ang sabi ng BFAR tagalang mayroong ginagamit. Mayroong nag-sasabi matagal na raw ginagawa 'yan. And I do know that there are cases of cyanide fishing

before, even here in the Philippines. but I think the reason that it has been more alarming is that it has become more prevalent. Kaya 'yon ang inaalala natin," anang pangulo.

Sinabi ng presidente na kapag mayroong sapat na ebidensiyang magpapatunay sa cyanide fishing ay dapat lamang na magsampa ng kaso laban sa China. (Aileen Taliping)



LIBONG SOLAR POWER IRRIGATION, IPAKAKALAT SA MGA SAKAHAN



REMATE OPINION
**PINDOT AT
SUNDOT**
NI JR. REYES

ORAS na makumpleto na ang isinusulong ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. na paglikha ng proyektong solar irrigation para sa dagdag patubig na magagamit ng mga magsasaka, posibleng hindi na tayo mag-angkat ng bigas sa ibang bansa.

Sa pagtaya kasi ng Pangulong Marcos, makapagpapatubig ang isang unit ng solar power irrigation ng 20-ektarya ng lupang sakahan kahit pa nga sa panahon ng tagtuyot lalo sa panahon ng El Nino.

Walang duda na ngayon pa lang ay excited na ang mga magsasaka dahil nangangahulugan ito ng dagdag na produksyon para sa dagdag na kita lalo't pangunahing problema ang patubig sa panahon ng tag-init.

Nangako kasi si Presidente BBM na ikakalat ng Department of Agriculture ang libo-libong unit ng mga solar power irrigation sa lahat ng mga lupang sakahan sa bansa kaya malaki ang kumpanyansa ng mga magsasaka na malalabanan nila ang problemang epekto ng tagtuyot lalo't batid nila na kapag nangako ang Pangulo, tiyak

na tutuparin ito.

Nais ni PBBM na ibuhos ang tulong sa mga magsasaka upang matiyak ang seguridad sa pagkain lalo na ngayong kumakaharap ang bansa sa banta ng El Niño na magdudulot ng pagkatuyo at pagkakabitak-bitak ng mga bukirin.

Bagama't nakapag-rehistro ang Pilipinas noong nagdaang taon ng pinakamalaking produksiyon ng palay na umaabot sa mahigit 20-metriko tonelada na kauna-unahan sa matagal na panahon, naniniwala si PBBM na hindi rito natatapos ang kanilang pagtulong sa mga magsasaka.

Kaya naman hindi tumitigil ang Pangulong BBM ng pagkakaloob ng suporta sa mga magsasaka at pagkakaloob ng mga makinarya, libreng pataba at punla, pati na rin sa pagpapa-plano kung papaano malalabanan ang El Nino at isa nga rito ang pagtatayo ng solar-powered irrigation.

Kahit nga hindi pa batid kung saan kukuhanin ang pondo para sa ganitong proyekto, sinabi ng Presidential Communication Office na maglalaan ng P17 bilyon ang administrasyon para sa proyektong Solar Irrigation.

Sana, madaliin na ng DA ang ganitong kagandang proyekto para sa mga magsasaka lalo ngayong dumaranas ng tagtuyot at kawalan ng tubig pang-irigasyon ang maraming magsasaka.

REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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Tsina, Vietnam kakasuhan sa cyanide fishing

MAAARING magsampa ng kaso ang Pilipinas laban sa China at Vietnam sa gitna ng alegasyon ng cyanide fishing sa Bajo de Masinloc.

Sinabi ni National Task Force West Philippine Sea spokesperson Jonathan Malaya na sisimulan na ng pamahalaan na imbestigahan ang ulat ng paggamit ng cyanide.

Ipadadala ang resulta ng imbestigasyon sa Department of Justice at Office of the Solicitor General para sa posibleng paghahain ng kaso sa korte.

Ibinunyag ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources na ginamitan ng cyanide ng Chinese fishermen ang Bajo de Masinloc upang maitaboy sa lugar ang mga mangingisdang Pinoy.

Maging ang Vietnamese fishermen ay gumagamit din ng cyanide sa Bajo de Masinloc, ayon kay BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera. Nakumpirma rin nila ang pagkasira ng coral reefs mula sa kanilang ground personnel.

Sinabi rin ni Malaya naalarma na rin ang National Security Council sa nasabing paggamit ng cyanide subalit sinabi nitong dapat idaan muna lahat sa malalim na imbestigasyon..

Ayon sa BFAR, dapat umanong mabuo ang pagsasadokumento ng lahat ng ebidensya na makakalap, kasama na ang mga affidavit ng mga testigo at isumite ang mga ito sa National Task Force-West Philippine Sea.

Pinasinungalan naman ni Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning ang bintang sinabi nitong pawang mga kathang-isip lamang ang lahat.

Sinabi rin nitong labis na pinahahalagahan ng pamahalaang China ang lugar kaya pinoprotektahan at pinangangalagaan nito ang kapaligiran ng pangisdaan at nilalabanan nito lahat ang mga gawaing labag sa batas at patakaran para sa lugar.

Lumilikha lang umano ng tensyon at hindi magandang relasyon sa pagitan ng Pilipinas at China ang ganitong mga bintang.

Sinabi pa nitong dapat hawakan ang mga ganitong issue nang seryoso at makipag-ugnayan agad sa China para sa mapangalagaan ang kapayapaan at kaayusan sa nasabing karagatan. **KRIS JOSE**



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NDRRMC places infra damage at P1.2b in Davao, Caraga due to incessant rains

DAMAGE to infrastructure due to the rains induced by the amihan (northeast monsoon) and the trough of low pressure area that drenched Mindanao has reached nearly P1.2 billion, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said Tuesday.

The destruction is concentrated mostly in Davao which suffered P933 million losses and Caraga (P265.6 million) regions, according to the agency's latest situation report.

Agricultural damage was placed at P558.2 million in the two regions.

The death toll was at 22, all from

Davao region although the reporters were still under validation, the NDRRMC said.

The NDRRMC was also validating reports of 11 injured and two missing persons.

A total of 1,762 houses were damaged in Northern Mindanao, Davao and Caraga, it added.

The NDRRMC earlier said a total of 16,261 individuals remained in 73 evacuation centers in the Davao and Caraga Regions amid the flooding and landslides in Mindanao.

The agency also reported that 273,543 people, or 91,843 families, had sought temporary shelter outside of evacuation centers.

The floods and landslides affected 1.5 million people in 881 barangays in Northern Mindanao, the Davao Region, Soccsksargen, Caraga, and BARMM.

The Department of Agriculture recorded P558.3 million in damages to crops, affecting 19,071 farmers and fishermen.

For its part, the National Irrigation Administration reported P454.6 million worth of damage in the Davao Region alone.

There were 1,762 houses damaged due to the disasters, 751 of them totally and 1,011 partially. Eighty roads and 16 bridges remained impassable in various parts of the Davao Region and Caraga.

The NDRRMC said as of the weekend, a total of P254,911,720 worth of assistance had been provided to affected residents. The assistance included family food packs, water, hygiene kits, medical supplies, modular tents, and sleeping kits. **Vince Lopez**

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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'LITTLE BEHAVIORAL CHANGES'

PINOYS URGED TO CONSERVE WATER, FOOD, POWER RESOURCES TO CUSHION EL NIÑO IMPACT

By Julie M. Aurelio
@JMAurelioINQ

A Malacañang official urged the public to make "little behavioral changes" in conserving water, food and energy resources as El Niño's effects "cannot be quantified and predicted."

In an interview on the state-run television program "Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon" on Tuesday,

Presidential Communications Office (PCO) Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama said the government has started conservation efforts and Filipinos should also do their part.

"We should not let our guard down, just because the government said we have enough water and food and there will be no interruption in electricity until a certain

period of the year. We should do our share to help," said the PCO official who is also spokesperson for Task Force El Niño.

"The government will get the ball rolling, but we also ask our countrymen to help in curbing El Niño's impact. How? Through behavioral changes, those little things will be a big help in conserving our resources," he said.

One example of "behavioral changes," Villarama said, would be to remember to switch off lights or appliances when these are not in use.

Prepare for the worst

But aside from conserving energy, people must also brace for the worst, he added.

"You cannot quantify what you cannot predict. We're up

against nature. We're already feeling the effects of a strong and mature El Niño," Villarama said.

"Because we are up against nature, we don't know if it will destroy our crops any further. So we will intensify our monitoring and reassess not just the water, food and energy supply but everything. Even our people's health, because we are already suffering from

the heat," he said.

The PCO official made the remarks amid reports that the weather phenomenon has so far damaged rice and corn crops in the country worth P151.4 million.

Earlier, Villarama said that a total of 41 provinces have been affected by El Niño, with Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula the hardest hit. INQ



More coconut farmer involvement urged at levy fund operations level

A FARMER organization said the government needs to consult more extensively with coconut producers on the use of funds sourced from coconut levy assets.

In a statement, Federation of Free Farmers Chairman Leonardo Q. Montemayor urged Finance Secretary Ralph G. Recto to appoint coconut farmer representatives to advise the Trust Fund Management Committee on the proper deployment of the fund's assets.

"The Trust Fund Management Committee 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 projects and support services to be extended to coconut farmers and their organizations," he added.

The Secretary of Finance serves as chairman and fund manager on the trust fund committee, while the Secretaries of Justice and Budget serve as members.

Republic Act No. 11521, or the Coconut Farmers and Industry Trust Fund Act, puts coconut levy assets into a trust fund that will finance the rehabilitation and modernization of the coconut industry. — **Adrian H. Halili**



Soybeans, corn rise

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybean futures gained more ground on Tuesday, with the market climbing to its highest level in almost one week on the back of short-covering, although rising global supplies kept a lid on prices.

Wheat dropped to its weakest level in three months on pressure from abundant Black Sea supplies, while corn rose for the first time in four sessions.

"There is some short-covering in the market today but overall prices are depressed due to large South American supplies," said Dennis Voznesenski, associate director for agricultural economics at Commonwealth Bank of Australia in Sydney.

"On top of that there are improved planting prospects in the US versus 2023 for the 2024 season."

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was up 1 percent at \$11.84-1/4 a bushel, the highest since Feb. 14. Wheat slid 0.3 percent to \$5.57-1/4 a bushel, after dropping earlier in the session to \$5.55 a bushel, the lowest since Nov. 16.

Corn added 0.5 percent to \$4.18-3/4 a bushel.

Large speculators increased their net short position in CBOT corn futures in the week ended Feb. 13, regulatory data released on Friday showed. - Reuters



London cocoa futures resume climb while white sugar prices ease

LONDON — London cocoa futures on ICE rose on Monday with the market resuming its recent climb after a short-term setback, while white sugar prices fell.

New York-based raw sugar, arabica coffee and cocoa contracts were closed on Monday due to a public holiday in the United States.

COCOA: May London cocoa ended 1.6% higher at £4,597 a metric ton.

Dealers said the outlook for crops in West Africa continued to deteriorate, potentially increasing the size of an already large global deficit in the 2023/2024 season.

High heat and a lack of rain last week in most of Ivory Coast's cocoa-growing regions could slow the start and reduce the size of the April to September mid-crop, farmers said on Monday.

Cocoa arrivals at ports in top grower Ivory Coast had reached 1.128 million tons by Feb. 18 since the start of the season on Oct. 1, down about 32% from the same period last season, exporters estimated on Monday.

SUGAR: May white sugar closed down 1% at \$632.10 per ton.

Dealers said weather in the Center-South region of Brazil remained a key focus with concerns about dryness persisting despite recent showers.

"Some rain was received in CS Brazil but we doubt it is enough to replenish soil moisture and in any case, some development is probably already lost," analysts Green Pool said in a report.

COFFEE: May robusta coffee ended 1% higher at \$3,172 a ton.

— Reuters