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## Meat importers confirm delayed MAV quota distribution by DA

MEAT IMPORTERS said the government has not started apportioning quotas out of the minimum access volume (MAV), with traders not receiving any allocations in 2024.

In a Feb. 26 letter addressed to Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr., the Meat Importers and Traders Association (MITA) said the quotas should have been released during the first week of January.

"While the protection of local producers is well intended, we would point out that the objective of the MAV is in fact to introduce competition," MITA President Jesus C. Cham said.

Citing a meeting with the MAV Advisory Council, Mr. Cham added that the Department of Agriculture (DA) intended to suspend the quota for corn entirely, while the quota for pork will be reallocated to give processors a larger share compared to the traders.

He said the council had recommended proceeding with MAV quota distribution in 2024.

"MITA strongly urges DA to allow (the MAV Secretariat) to proceed with the distribution of the Beginning Year Pool," he said.

He added that any changes to the guidelines should follow due process, which includes consultations, a regulatory impact assessment, finalization, and presentation to the advisory council and the management committee for approval.

"Proper notification should then be made to the WTO and our trading partners. The current MAV year should carry on as usual, and new guidelines, if approved, can come in the next MAV year," Mr. Cham said.

The DA had proposed the suspension of the MAV for pork and corn to lower dependence on imports.

MAV allows trading partners guaranteed market access, subject to volume quotas. The MAV system is a feature of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) trading system.

The Philippines has committed to admit 54,210 metric tons (MT) of pork and 216,940 MT of corn.

"A 60% or 90% reduction would render (imports) not economically feasible to utilize or even unusable," he said.

He added that smaller businesses and their clients would be deprived of MAV products, which may make their goods less competitive when compared to bigger businesses.

"Removing (or) reducing the quota volumes is anti-competitive. Instead of shielding producers from competition, we should strive to make them more competitive," Mr. Cham said.

The British Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines has raised concerns regarding the DA's proposal to suspend the MAV for the two commodities. It warned that the move could affect supply and trade agreements. — **Adrian H. Halili**





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## Seven-point agriculture agenda

**S**hortly before the Marcos administration began, I wrote of “seven deadly sins” in the historically flawed governance of our agriculture sector, our economy’s backbone (“Seven deadly sins,” 6/14/22). I’ve long argued that our agriculture’s sorry state comes not from a lack of knowledge or technology, which we once taught our neighbors. Rather, it traces to our age-old failure to enable our farmers to apply and benefit from that knowledge, due to problematic politics, flawed governance, and weak institutions in the sector. I shared these thoughts in a private meeting with Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francis Tiu Laurel Jr., who asked me to elaborate on how to undo the seven sins. Of course, I have no illusions that my advice has taken any precedence over that of countless others, knowing that I am but one in a cacophony of voices constantly feeding advice, solicited or not, to the good secretary.

Those seven sins logically lead to a seven-point agenda, outlined here. Some may not agree with all of them, but I plan to revisit them when this administration ends in 2028, to see what has been done, and assess any significant improvements achieved.

One, **let provinces lead** in managing their farms and fisheries, to reverse the sin of persistent top-down management of the sector despite mandated devolution since 1991. To its credit, the previous administration already rolled out a long overdue province-led agriculture and fisheries extension system or Pafes. For it to work, the DA must limit itself to “steering,” but take full responsibility for capacitating the provinces for the “rowing,” including downloading much of its budget to them as matching grants.

Two, **consolidate management of small farms** into efficient production units, to correct the sin of failure to address loss of economies of scale from farm fragmentation. A



### NO FREE LUNCH

CIELITO F. HABITO

Bureau of Agri-Industry and Cooperatives Development must be reestablished in the DA. Congress must lift land ownership ceilings for agri-business investors, who must be attracted with appropriate incentives. Contract growing must be fostered in a wider variety of farm and fishery products like in Thailand, and LGUs must provide longer and more secure leases for aquaculture investors.

Three, **pursue maximum productivity in our rice lands** (and all croplands), but help farmers in marginal rice lands shift to better-suited crops that will raise their incomes. The sin of undue obsession with full rice self-sufficiency only brought us farther from it as it was pursued through excessive trade controls that bred complacency from keeping productivity and cost competitive with our neighbors. Worse, it led to neglect of other crops, which received far less attention and budget.

Four, **look at the entire value chain** and overcome the sin of inordinate focus on production, rather than farmers’ and fishers’ incomes and welfare. Empower farmers and fishers to reap gains from value-adding through participation in transport/logistics and processing via coops. Foster local and foreign investments in agri-based industries

and rural transport and logistics via DA’s Agri-Industry Business Corridors program.

Five, **shift to a function-based structure and budget**, away from the traditional commodity-based orientation that proved inefficient, ineffective, and distortive. Recast DA to focus on its central “steering” functions: standards setting; integrated research for development and extension (R4DE); monitoring and evaluation; regulation that is science-based and separate from developmental functions; international relations; and most critically, capacity building for local government units.

Six, **pursue greater trade openness** to reverse the sin of excessive trade protection that removed pressure for both government and producers to pursue higher productivity and competitiveness with our neighbors—and moved up our prices further away from theirs over time. Use transparent tariffs, not trade controls, to provide calibrated protection for domestic producers, while opening trade to wider players to forestall capture by cartels. Ensure that sanitary and phytosanitary requirements are science-based and not used as undue trade barriers.

Seven, and possibly most crucial, **make financing widely accessible** to small farmers and fishers. Study how Thailand and South Korea did it in conjunction with cooperative development. Work with Congress to change regulatory metrics applied to Landbank (and the Development Bank of the Philippines) to let them focus primarily on their mission to finance small farms (and firms). Foster application of innovative financial technologies for small farmers and fishers.

We can’t fix Philippine agriculture with tired old approaches that never worked, or by adding more wheels to a defective vehicle moving in the wrong direction.

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# 'Pork prices to go up as DA limits imports'

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

Limiting imports under lower tariff rate could drive pork prices higher as micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) would lose access to "cheaper" imported stocks, meat importers warned yesterday.

In a letter to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., the Meat Importers and Traders Association (MITA) expressed concern surrounding the quotas for the minimum access volume (MAV) this year.

The group lamented that the quota allocations have not been distributed, almost a month into the current MAV

year.

The group also questioned the decision of the Department of Agriculture (DA) to limit the share of meat traders to 40 percent of the pork MAV, while 60 percent went to processors.

Furthermore, the group is lukewarm to the DA's move to issue first the 25 percent of this year's pork MAV.

The decision, MITA claimed,

"effectively" reduced the quota of traders by 90 percent, which it argued is a violation of the general principles of the MAV mechanism, particularly

in terms of transparency.

MITA said the bulk or over 120 of the present 145 licensees under pork MAV hold less

Turn to B3

## Pork From B1

than 500 metric tons of the annual allocations with an average quota of 150 MT each.

Based on the group's computations, MITA president Emeritus Jesus Cham told **The STAR** that the small-scale pork MAV importers would be left with just an import allocation of 15 MT.

This allocation, Cham explained, is disadvantageous to importers since it is less than the "economic lot size" of 25 MT for a 40 foot container, effectively discouraging them from importing their quotas.

"You (will) expect [pork] prices to go up since the (pork) retailers will be forced to go to big players and importers to get their imported stocks," he said.

The **STAR** learned that the DA has begun issuing provisional import certificates for imports under the minimum access volume (MAVIC).

Imports under the MAV are levied by the state with lower tariffs as part of the country's trade commitments.

The MAVIC is required for importers

to secure the lower tariff privilege.

Under Executive Order 50, pork imports within the MAV are levied with 15 percent tariff, while shipments outside it are slapped with 25 percent tariff until end of the year.

InterCommerce, the service provided of the DA for import certificates, sent a notice to MAV licensees last Feb. 23, informing them that the MAV Secretariat would begin distributing provisional MAVIC for the following commodities: poultry, corn, chipping potatoes, coffee beans, coffee extracts and pork.

However, the InterCommerce told the MAV licensees that only 25 percent of the tentative annual allocation for the pork MAV would be distributed.

InterCommerce directed the importers to reach out to the MAV Secretariat regarding the available pork MAV allocations and application procedures.

The **STAR** learned that the tentative pork quota in the current MAV year is at around 52,500 MT.



Pork prices are expected to go up due to import limits.





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## P20 per kilong bigas, scam - Baste

Tahasang sinabi ni Davao City Mayor Sebastian "Baste" Duterte na isang scam ang pangako ng gobyerno na ibaba sa P20 ang presyo ng bigas sa bansa.

Ang P20 per kilong bigas ay isa sa campaign promise ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. noong 2022 presidential elections.

"Kahibaw mo unsa'y pinakakatawanan ani

tanan? Ibakak nimo ang tag-20 nga bugas. Scam na. (Alam n'yo kung anong nakakatawa tungkol dito? Nagsinungaling siya tungkol sa P20 per kilo ng bigas. Scam ito)," diin ni Mayor Duterte sa wikang Cebuano nang dumalo ito sa prayer rally na inorganisa ng Cebu Coalition for Transparency, Accountability, Peace and Security sa Cebu City nitong Linggo nang gabi.

Sa kanyang vlog nitong weekend, sinabi ni Pangulong Marcos na ang isyu ng presyo ng bigas ay hindi lang seryosong problema sa Pilipinas kundi pati na sa ilang bansa sa Asya.

"Hindi natin maiwasan na makita, talagang nagiging problema ang pagtaas ng presyo ng bigas dito sa Pilipinas. Pero, kung titignan po natin kahit na'yong mga nag-

i-export na mga bansa ay tumataas din ang presyo nila, halos katumbas lang ng pagtaas dito sa Pilipinas," paliwanag nito.

Nauna nang sinabi ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. na hindi kakayanin na maibaba sa P20 ang kilo ng bigas dahil sa problema sa world market.

"The P20 per kilo was an aspiration. The problem [is] we are now at a 15-year high [in] world market [prices]. What was previously at \$230 per ton in Vietnam, today it's \$700 per ton. Today, it is not possible," wika ni Laurel sa isang press briefing noong Nobyembre 2023.

"The problem around the world is so complicated. There's climate change, El Niño is now here and it will continue until the middle of next year. Anything can happen. We don't know when there will be another war in other places, and we don't know if a ship will get stuck in the Suez Canal," dagdag ng kalihim.





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**DA, PhilSA  
bolster PH agri  
via advanced  
space tech**

EVEN the advanced space technology shall now be used to help boost the country's agricultural sector, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Monday.

In a news release, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the Bureau of Agricultural and Fisheries Engineering (BAFE) secured its partnership with the Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA) to modernize the monitoring of agricultural commodities and farm-to-market roads (FMR).

"The collaboration between DA-BAFE and PhilSA exemplifies the spirit of partnership and synergy that is essential for driving meaningful change. By pooling together our respective expertise and resources, we can co-create innovative solutions that have the potential to revolutionize the way we approach agriculture," he said.

Under the memorandum of agreement (MOA), both agencies shall "utilize satellite data and space technology applications" through the Digital Agri Phase 1 project (Farm-to-Market Road and Agricultural Commodity Geodatabase and Remote Sensing Application Phase 1).

"Using technology and data analytics, we can gain invaluable insights into crop health, and soil conditions, enabling us to make informed decisions and implement targeted interventions," Tiu Laurel said.

In a separate statement, the PhilSA said the Digital Agri Phase 1 project entails the use of remote sensing applications, road type, and accessibility mapping, which shall provide near real-time updates on the FMR and movement of agricultural commodities.

PNA





## The Scarborough Shoal — again

**R**ATHER queasy indeed, to have to read again that a regular rotational deployment by a Philippine vessel of fuel to Filipino fishermen and patrol operations in Bajo de Masinloc has been blocked and “blinded” by the Chinese Coast Guard.

Bajo de Masinloc, 150 miles west of Luzon and nearly 559 miles from the nearest major Chinese island mass of Hainan, has been a flashpoint between the countries since China seized it from the Philippines in 2012.

Bajo de Masinloc, also known as Scarborough Shoal after a British ship grounded on the atoll nearly three centuries ago, is clearly within the Philippines’ 200-mile exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, even while China claims “historic right” in that it was discovered during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

It is one of Asia’s most contested maritime features and a flashpoint for diplomatic flare-ups over sovereignty and fishing rights.

Interestingly, the Philippines has been exercising effective occupation and jurisdiction over the area, with maps produced in the Philippines, Europe and the United States identifying it as part of Philippine territory.

The Philippines exercises full sovereignty and jurisdiction over the rocks of Bajo de Masinloc, and sovereign rights over the waters and continental shelf where the rock features where the shoal is.

Bajo de Masinloc is in the middle of the South China Sea, claimed nearly in its entirety by China’s unilateral and mythical ‘nine-dash line’ and near shipping lanes carrying an estimated \$3.4 trillion of annual ship commerce.



***The sovereign rights and jurisdiction asserted by the Philippines over the maritime entitlements of the features in Bajo de Masinloc are founded on principles of international law***

That position, according to diplomats, is strategic for Beijing, whose claims overlap with those of the Manila, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur and Brunei Darussalam.

In 2016, an international arbitration tribunal in the Hague said China’s claims had no legal basis, a decision

Beijing rejected.

The sovereign rights and jurisdiction asserted by the Philippines over the maritime entitlements of the features in Bajo de Masinloc are founded on principles of international law and consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which both the Philippines and China have signed and ratified.

A lighthouse or watchtower was also established there in 1965 and renovated in 1992, without any protestation from China.

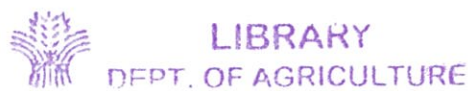
Last week, the Chinese Coast Guard said it drove away a vessel of the Philippines’ Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and accused them of “illegally intruding” into its waters near Scarborough Shoal.

We agree with Commodore Jay Tarriela, the Philippine Coast Guard’s spokesperson on South China Sea issues, who said: “This statement is inaccurate. The BFAR vessel, BRP Datu Sanday, continues to patrol the waters of Bajo De Masinloc. Currently, the BFAR vessel is actively ensuring the security of Filipino fishermen in that area.”

Tarriela said it was not the first time the Chinese Coast Guard blocked a Philippine vessel’s Automatic Identification System, a short-range coastal tracking system used on ships to provide identification and positioning information to both vessels and shore stations.

In the meantime, the browbeater continues its nauseous act. And the world appears helpless.





British  
chamber  
bucks MAV  
suspension

THE British Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines (BCCP) said the suspension of the minimum access volume (MAV) was not ideal as the country still needed pork imports due to the impact of the hog disease on domestic supply.

"In that context, we would not wish to see a suspension of MAV," BCCP Executive Director and Trustee Chris Nelson said in a statement on Monday.

"As we've discussed on previous programs, pork supply has been impacted locally due to the African swine fever, and there's definitely a need to further continue pork imports," he added.

The BCCP released the statement as there were reports that the Department of Agriculture (DA) was reviewing plans to suspend the MAV on pork and corn to curb the country's agricultural imports.

It added that the MAV suspension could affect the domestic supply and prices and the country's existing trade agreement with the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The chamber, meanwhile, expressed support for extending reduced tariffs as per Executive Order 50 for agricultural products like pork to boost local supply and address inflation concerns.

"We are very strong supporters of the extension of the Executive Order [50]; we believe strongly that allowing pork to come at lowered tariff rates is

a help for inflation and food security," said Nelson.

According to the BCCP, one of the keys to strengthening the local agricultural sector is the passage of the Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Act.

The chamber said they remained optimistic about its passage as it would help ensure a stable food supply and help fight inflation.

Last year, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. highlighted it as one of its top 20 legislative priorities. The proposed bill imposes harsh penalties for illegal activities such as smuggling, hoarding, profiteering, and forming cartels within the agricultural and fishery sectors.

The bill amends Republic Act 10845, also known as the "Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016," and will impose stricter penalties.

It also aims to protect consumers against economic manipulation, preserve farmers' livelihoods, and improve tax and duty collection.

"Its passage remains part of the BCCP 2024 wish list to reinforce a stronger agricultural sector in the Philippines with increased collaborative efforts with the Department of Agriculture, the UK Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), and other concerned agencies," said BCCP.

Also, the British chamber supports the DA's effort to establish a technical working group to help amend RA 10845.

"We hereby acknowledge the role of agriculture in the Philippine economic growth, and we look forward to the Bicameral Conference and, therefore, the passage of the Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Act," said Nelson.

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**





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## Fishing in troubled waters

THERE are stark realities that we



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**ORLANDO MERCADO**

continue to confront in the West Philippine Sea. China is now a maritime power. It is also the world leader in shipbuilding. It has a coercive and heavy-handed maritime militia. It has a navy and a coast guard that operate from illegally reclaimed and militarized outposts. ➤MercadoA6

### ■ MERCADO FROM A1

## Fishing in troubled waters

The provocative actions of China as regards offshore oil and gas development have endangered our energy security.

There is an equally important issue that will directly affect the food security of our nation. The country faces a decline in fish output as a consequence of the destruction of 21,000 acres of the West Philippine Sea.

According to assistant professor Mike Atrigeneo of the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute, studies and reports show that China's activities, such as dredging, clam harvesting, and building artificial islands, have caused massive damage to at least 21,000 acres of coral reefs in the West Philippine Sea.

There are also reports alleging that China uses cyanide in large-scale fishing in Scarborough (Panatag) Shoal. The use of cyanide destroys algae and coral polyps, which are food sources for the fish. While it makes catching fish easier by rendering them stunned,

it poisons the marine ecosystem. Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) spokesman Narciso Briguera said the estimated damage in the sea region could reach up to \$17.85 million.

The marine environment in the WPS is the habitat of lapu-lapu, maya-maya and other fish that eat directly from the corals. If their homes are destroyed, the fish may face extinction, which translates to a decline in catch for fisherfolk. This is bad news not only for Filipinos whose livelihood depends on the sea but for all of us who consume seafood.

In 2023, the BFAR confirmed that fish production in provinces near the WPS was already declining. Between 2021 and 2022, it dropped by more than 6 percent, from 295,332 metric tons to 275,872. This is due not only to overfishing and several typhoons that prevented fisherfolk from venturing out to sea but also to China's unwelcome activities in the area.

To help our countrymen, BFAR remains constant in its efforts to provide regular assistance in the form of resupply missions and the provision of fuel, ready-to-eat snacks and medicine. But the threat to their livelihood continues to be both present and persistent.

The destruction of coral reefs must stop. While there are ways to restore and rehabilitate them, it's essential that activities contributing to their demise are halted as soon as possible. Only then can we exert efforts to heal them effectively.

China should abide by the international conventions it ratified. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea's (Unclos) Articles 192 and 194 state the general obligation for states to protect and preserve the marine environment and prevent, reduce, and control pollution of the marine environment from any source. China should also follow the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna

and Flora and the Convention on Biological Diversity, which aim to conserve natural resources.

According to Thucydides, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

But that's just the History of the Peloponnesian War.

We cannot simply accept suffering because we are "weak." We have already found strength in allies who are similarly situated. The world is now awakening to our responsibility of stewardship in maritime resources that are common to all. This is the countervailing force that finds strength in numbers.

China may have the objective to seize the whole South China Sea, but we have a responsibility to the region, and that is to protect the very important component of our common food security.

With this renewed attention to the marine biodiversity affected by Chinese aggression, a call to action to protect marine resources and their biodiversity is as urgent as ever.





## FRLC takes over N. Ecija hydropower plant

FIRST Gen Corp. subsidiary Fresh River Lakes Corp. (FRLC) officially took over the ownership and operation of the Casecnan hydroelectric power plant from the Power Sector Assets and Liabilities Management Corp. (PSALM) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) yesterday.

FRLC said the move followed after securing all regulatory permits and remitted payment for the purchase of the 165 megawatts (MW) power plant in Pantabangan, Nueva Ecija.

Last year, PSALM auctioned off the power plant as part of the government's privatization program wherein First Gen through FRLC, topped the auction with a \$526-million offer.

"From the perspective of First Gen, building a similar hydro plant from scratch would have been more expensive and would have required a lengthy preparation time of up to seven, if not more years for planning, designing, permitting and construction," said Dennis Gonzales, First Gen senior vice president and head of hydro group.

"Our winning offer, therefore, helped the company save on cost and precious time to construct a similar hydro project," Gonzales added.

Aside from the plant itself, other power components that First Gen acquired from the government include the switchyard, the administration complex, guest house and some roads.

Meanwhile, ownership of the non-power components of Casecnan, such as the irrigation facilities, the weir and the tunnel, remained with the government, through NIA and PSALM. The use of these facilities is governed by separate operations and maintenance agreements.

Other hydro facilities owned by First Gen include the 132 MW Pantabangan-Masiway hydroelectric power plant, a storage hydropower plant with a dam and reservoir located close to Casecnan.

The company is also constructing the 120 MW Aya pumped storage hydro project, also in Pantabangan, on top of other run-of-river hydro projects in Mindanao. - *Jed Macapagal*





## Probe of cyanide fishing at Scarborough Shoal sought

By John Victor D. Ordoñez  
Reporter

A PHILIPPINE senator has filed a resolution seeking to investigate the damage caused by cyanide fishing at Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, allegedly by Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen.

The Senate should look at the incident because it undermines the Philippines' marine ecosystem and territorial integrity, Senator Francis N. Tolentino said in Resolution 938, citing reports that the damage had reached P1 billion.

"The Philippines, as a party to the Convention of Biological Diversity signed in 1992, is obligated to guard against the unsustainable use of coastal and marine resources which includes the country's commitment to addressing the threat of cyanide use and its impact on coastal biodiversity," he said.

The convention has been ratified by 196 countries.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning earlier said the allegations of cyanide fishing were "baseless and a sheer fabrication."

"The use of cyanide or other noxious or poisonous substances is a clear case of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing," Mr. Tolentino said, adding that it undermines the sustainability of the global marine ecosystem.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) on Feb. 17 said Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen had been using cyanide at Scarborough Shoal, locally called Bajo de Masinloc, to prevent Filipino fishing boats from fishing in the area.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has ordered the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and BFAR to conduct joint scientific research to find out if Chinese fisher-

men were behind the cyanide use. The agencies will work with the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute.

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

Located within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ), Scarborough Shoal is also claimed by China, making it one of Asia's most contested maritime features and a flashpoint for flare-ups.

China claims almost the entire South China Sea, a conduit for more than \$3 trillion in annual ship commerce. Its territorial claims overlap with those of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei.

Mr. Marcos had ordered stricter patrols at the shoal.

Based on a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in December, China's dredging and giant clam harvesting have damaged at least 21,000 acres of coral reefs in the South China Sea.

Vietnam has also been building outposts in the area, damaging at least 1,500 acres of coral reefs through dredging. The Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan have damaged fewer than 100 acres of coral reefs, according to the study.

At the weekend, the Chinese Embassy in Manila questioned the results of the study since it had only relied on satellite images.

"China has always attached great importance to the protection of the ecological environment of the Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands) and reefs and their adjacent waters, and carried out environmental protection and monitoring work in accordance with domestic and international laws," it said in a statement on Feb. 24.

 FULL STORY



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# PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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STRANDED THRICE

## RESCUED DOLPHIN IN PANGASINAN RECEIVES CARE AT SUBIC'S OCEAN ADVENTURE

By Joanna Rose Aglibot  
@InqNational

SUBIC BAY FREEPORT—A stranded male rough-toothed dolphin has been placed under the care of Ocean Adventure's animal care team inside this free port after several failed attempts to return it to its natural habitat.

The dolphin was initially assisted by local fishermen in Pangasinan on Feb. 14, when it

was stranded at Barangay Aoleng in Agno town.

His rescuers gave him the name "Hart," a wordplay for "heart," as he was found on Valentine's Day.

Despite efforts to release him back into the waters, Hart restranded the following day in the waters off Barangay Boboy in the same town, indicating he likely had health issues.

Recognizing the urgency,

authorities relocated Hart to Ilocos region's Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) rehabilitation pen in Cariatz Island, Alaminos City, also in Pangasinan, for intensive care and monitoring before he was sent off to sea anew.

### Limited resources

However, Hart was again stranded in another Pangasinan town, San Fabian, on Feb.

19, prompting his transfer to Ocean Adventure's facility.

Citing the limited resources of BFAR, the agency recommended Hart's transfer to Ocean Adventure, a marine theme park where specialized care could be administered.

The facility's animal care team is providing tailored treatment, including antibiotics, liver support, electrolytes and supplements, as well as physical therapy to address health concerns.

py to address health concerns.

Ocean Adventure is an open-water marine theme park at Subic Bay Freeport. The facility, on its website, described itself as a "leader in animal care and welfare" that has a team of environmentalists and conservationists actively protecting marine and wildlife, while offering wholesome entertainment to the public.

In an interview on Monday,

Robert Gonzaga, president and CEO of Subic Bay Marine Exploratorium Inc. that operates Ocean Adventure, said BFAR and the marine theme park's facility have been collaborating to safeguard marine life and ensure successful rescue attempts.

He cited the facility's commitment to providing the best care possible for Hart and other distressed marine mammals under its care. *INQ*





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## Farmers' group: High retail prices of rice to persist

By **BELLA CARIASO**

High retail prices of rice will persist as imported varieties dominate the local market, farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura president Rosendo So said yesterday.

"Since there is more imported rice in the market, we expect high retail prices this month," So said in a radio interview.

The latest Bureau of Plant Industry

(BPI) data showed that rice imports as of Feb. 16 hit 569,286 metric tons, or 44.28 percent higher than the 394,553 MT combined volume imported in January and February of last year.

So noted that the farmgate price of palay in Vietnam was at P21 per kilo while the wholesale price reached P50 per kilo.

"The retail price in the markets reached P52 to P56 per kilo, that's the

prevailing price in Vietnam," he said.

BPI data showed that more than half of the rice imports or about 327,418.09 MT came from Vietnam, followed by Thailand at 154,234.38 MT and Pakistan at 60,638.3 MT.

"Our rice imports from Thailand are also high. The 25 percent broken rice is at \$585 per metric ton. If you include the delivery freight, it could reach \$620 per metric ton and the landed cost is P49 (per kilo). It is

about P53 to P54 when it reaches the markets," So pointed out.

However, all is not bleak as So also expects the retail prices to go down when the harvest season starts on March 15, which also means more local rice supply in the market.

So noted that the present farmgate price of local palay is P24.50 per kilo.

"It is higher compared to the farmgate price of palay in Vietnam but you will still add the shipping cost

(for Vietnam rice)," he said.

Beginning March 15, the group expects retail prices of well-milled rice to go down to P52 per kilo.

The US Department of Agriculture earlier hiked its rice import forecast for the Philippines to 3.9 million MT this year, driven by bigger purchases from Vietnam. The Philippines imported almost 3.6 million MT of rice last year, down from the record-high 3.82 million MT in 2022.



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Malabon Mayor Jeannie Sandoval, accompanied by representatives from the Department of Labor and Employment and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, turns over 20 boats to fishermen in the city yesterday.

ERNIE PEÑAREDONDO

## Malabon fishermen get 20 boats from BFAR, DOLE

Members of four fisherfolk groups in Malabon yesterday received 20 motorized boats from the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources** as well as the Department of Labor and Employment.

Mayor Jeannie Sandoval led the turnover of the boats at the city's amphitheater.

The beneficiaries are residents of

Barangays Tañong, Hulong Duhat, Concepcion and Ibaba, according to Luziel Balajadia, who heads the city's public employment and services office.

Balajadia said the boats, which are made of fiberglass-reinforced plastic, were created by Malabon fishermen who underwent training with BFAR.

"They created the boats for about 20 days, receiving P610 per day as salary under DOLE's Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers or TUPAD program," the city government said.

The fishermen also received 40 fishing nets.

— Mark Ernest Villeza





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## Pork ban lifted in Bacolod, retained in Negros Occ

**BACOLOD CITY** – The provincial government of Negros Occidental has issued an order retaining the ban on the entry of all live feeds, boar semen, pork and pork products, especially from areas affected by African swine fever (ASF).

In signing the order yesterday, Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson cited differences in the zoning for ASF-affected areas.

The provincial capital Bacolod, being a highly urbanized city, has been classified by the Department of Agriculture (DA) under

the red zone. Negros Occidental is under the dark green zone.

Although under the red zone, the city government of Bacolod lifted the pork ban to address the problem of lack of supply.

Earlier, Negros Occidental and Bacolod jointly issued Executive Order No. 1, which set aside a similar EO they issued last year.

The EO established the guidelines for the entry of live pigs, boar semen, pork, pork products and other related food items from areas with reported cases of ASF.

The setting aside of the 2023 EO paved the way for Bacolod and Negros Occidental to issue respective guidelines on the entry of live pigs, pork and its related products from areas with reported cases of ASF.

Mayor Alfredo Abelardo Benitez on Feb. 23 signed EO No. 9, directing the city veterinary office to allow movement of pork and other swine products in the city.

In his latest order, Lacson said entry of all live pigs, boar semen, pork and its related products from Bacolod City, Cebu, Eastern

Visayas, Negros Oriental, Luzon, Mindanao, Panay, Guimaras, Camotes and Bantayan Islands as well as countries affected by ASF is prohibited.

Lacson said a majority of cities and municipalities in Negros Occidental are classified under the pink and light green zones.

These areas are ready for hog repopulation and implementation of biosecurity measures to prevent a recurrence of trans-boundary swine diseases.

– Gilbert Bayoran





## ***Probe on online sale of smuggled onions sought***

The rampant online selling of smuggled onions and other agricultural products must be investigated by the House of Representatives as it is detrimental to local farmers' livelihood and consumers' health, according to AGRI party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee.

"I received complaints from local onion farmers that they have been losing money because the farmgate price of their products is very low. They are worried that time will come when they can no longer sell onions because it is available online at much cheaper prices," Lee said.

In House Resolution 1600 Lee authored, he said there is a need to "take decisive action and measures... amid the online selling of smuggled onions."

Citing data from farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura, he noted that farmers are already incurring losses as onions' farmgate price is pegged at P28 per kilo when the production costs stand at P30 per kilo.

They also received complaints from consumers who bought products online, he recalled.

"They cannot return the products to

the seller. The Department of Agriculture earlier reported that there were smuggled onions confiscated that were positive for E. coli," he said, referring to a bacteria that can cause infections in the gut.

Smuggled items do not go through phytosanitary tests so their safety is not guaranteed, Lee warned.

Although he could not blame people who buy products online to save money, he noted there are health risks associated with it.

Lee asked the Department of Trade and Industry and other relevant agencies to implement more stringent measures to curb the online sale of illegally sourced agricultural products.

He also pushed for the immediate passage of his proposed bill to amend the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016, imposing heftier fines against smugglers, hoarders, price manipulators, cartels and government officials and employees involved in this crime, which is considered economic sabotage.

"Smuggling is the reason why our farmers are going into bankruptcy," he said.

- Sheila Crisostomo



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## Senate probe sought on cyanide fishing in Panatag Shoal

Sen. Francis Tolentino is seeking a Senate investigation into the alleged cyanide fishing carried out in parts of the ocean within Philippine territory, particularly near Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal, which he branded as "environmental terrorism."

Tolentino said the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Convention on Biological

Diversity and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species could be used as bases in the filing of complaints against those involved in cyanide fishing.

"Cyanide is more serious. I now consider this as environmental terrorism, destruction of our marine resources through the use of cyanide, and we have a lot of international agreements to hold

(perpetrators) accountable. Based on this, whoever violates will be liable," he said.

A complaint can be filed, he said, before the International Court of Justice "so that we can be compensated for the severity of the damage that our ocean has suffered."

"What will happen is the testimony of the fishermen will be taken, they will be

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## Senate

From Page 1

asked on how much they catch. Since using cyanide, dead fish float around... conventions provide where we file a case, we can be awarded with the corresponding damages," he said, citing a parallel investigation being done by the Department of Justice.

He noted that the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and fishing companies in Bajo de Masinloc can be summoned to the Senate hearing.

He admitted that the Chinese embassy cannot be invited to the Senate hearings due to immunity, although this can be waived if the Chinese voluntarily attend the hearing.

Meanwhile, with 23 affirmative votes, senators approved on third and final reading Senate Bill 2492 or the Philippine Maritime Zones Act that would reinforce the country's rights as an archipelagic state, authored by Tolentino.

Tolentino said SB 2492 is a landmark legislation that establishes the Philippine Maritime Zones in compliance with UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Ruling.

"The new law sets the archipelagic boundaries, the country's internal waters and exclusive economic zones over which the Philippine government exercises sovereignty and jurisdiction. Under the measure, the Philippine sovereign rights and jurisdiction over its exclusive economic zone in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) are highlighted together with the Benham Rise, now known as Talampas ng Pilipinas," he added.

Tolentino said the measure would

likewise protect the rights of Filipino fishermen over the vast resources of the West Philippine Sea as well as the untapped energy resources in the area.

He said the new law serves as the cornerstone of maritime policy, protecting the country's sovereignty and addressing national security needs.

"We can forge more alliances with other countries, under a rules-based international order in compliance with UNCLOS," he said, noting the law has been 30 years in the making.

Senate Majority Leader Joel Villanueva said the legislation would be part of the Philippines' legal, political and diplomatic strategies in enforcing the rule of law in its maritime domain.

Sen. Ramon Revilla Jr. said, "We are passing this proposal to inform those who trample on our sovereignty and destroy our natural resources (that) we will not be muzzled."

Sen. Robinhood Padilla said the hope of the Muslims for their claim to Sabah has been revived because of SB 2492.

Meanwhile, in an interview yesterday with Teleradyo Serbisyo, Tarriela said China's counter response to the transparency strategy of the Philippine government on the situation in the West Philippine Sea was to send out more trolls to flood social media.

"The approach now of China to counter the transparency strategy of the Phil government, particularly the NTF-WPS, is to carry out information operations to have more trolls and pro-China mouthpieces to misinform the Filipinos and for them to divide our country and not be united against China," he said, referring to the national task force. — Cecille Suerte Felipe, Evelyn Macairan



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## BFAR's relief operations boost morale of Filipino fishers in Bajo de Masinloc



More Filipino fishermen are now fishing in Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough Shoal, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said on Sunday, Feb. 25.

"Kumpara doon sa nakaraan nating misyon, mas nadagdagan ang Filipino fishing boats na nabigyan ng ayuda. From 21 noong nakaraan, ngayon po ay nasa 44. Maganda po itong senyales na ibig sabihin [ay] nadagdagan 'yung mga mangingisda natin na nangingisda ► 8



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## BFAR's relief operations boost morale of Filipino fishers in Bajo de Masinloc 1◀

sa Bajo de Masinloc (Compared to our previous mission, the number of Filipino fishing boats given aid has increased. From 21 in the past, now it is at 44. This is a good sign that means that our fishermen who fish in Bajo de Masinloc have increased)," BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said in a radio interview.

"Kaya tinitingnan namin ito bilang isang magandang senyales kasi ibig sabihin nito ay na-bo-boost 'yung morale ng mga mangingisda, tumataas ang kanilang tiwala sa pamahalaan na nandyan ang pamahalaan para bigyan sila ng suporta (So we look at this as a good sign because it means that the morale of the fishermen is boosted, their trust in the government is increasing that the government is there to give them support)," he added.

Briguera said that in its recent mission to Bajo de Masinloc, BFAR they provided aid to 44 Filipino fishers.

The BFAR said it has also provided 44,900 liters of diesel, 270 liters of drinking water, and 20 gallons of fresh water to the fishers.

Briguera said fishermen in Bajo de Masinloc have so far caught at least 40 tons of fish.

The China Coast Guard (CCG) and Chinese militia have been too busy monitoring BFAR's vessel, BRP Datu Sanday, to interfere with the Filipino fishermen's activities in Bajo de Masinloc, according to the BFAR official.

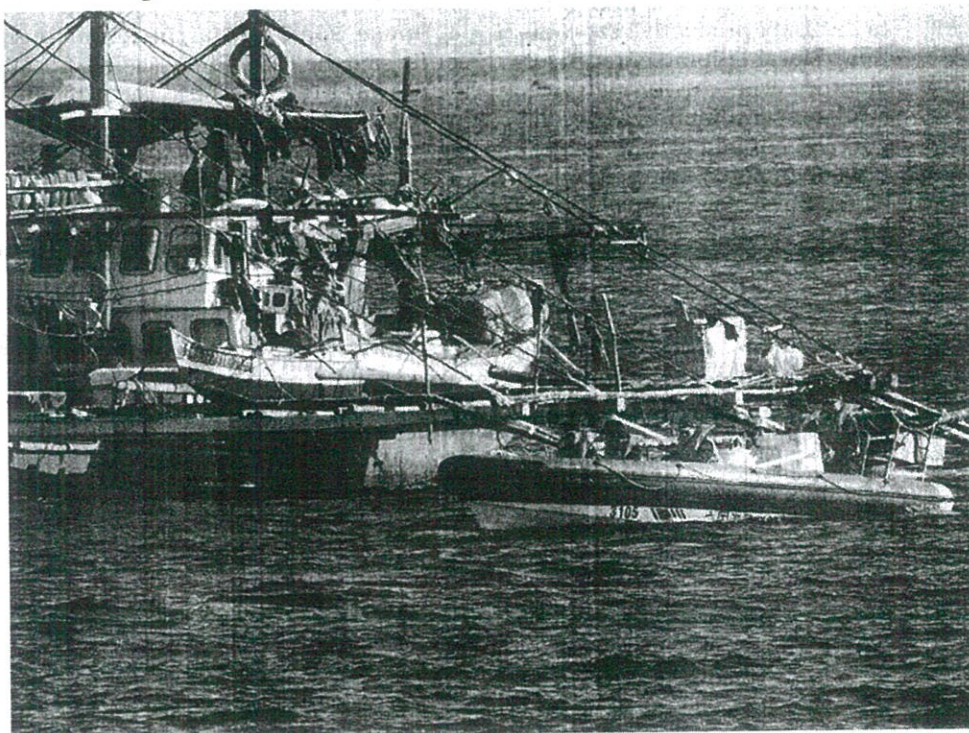
Recently, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) reported that the CCG blocked and blinded BFAR's vessel while heading to Bajo de Masinloc to provide fuel aid to Filipino fisherfolk on Feb. 22.

Briguera said the BFAR vessel still managed to assist Filipino fishers.

The BFAR had earlier announced that the Philippines has allocated at least ₱2.5 billion to purchase new floating assets to increase the government's presence and accompany Filipino fishers in the West Philippine Sea (WPS).

Per the BFAR spokesperson, the government will purchase monitoring control and surveillance (MCS) patrol vessels, food boats, and ships this year.

The BFAR noted that around 90 percent of the 385,300 fisherfolk in the vicinity of



**SHADOWED** — China Coast Guard personnel onboard a rigid-hulled inflatable boat (right) shadows a Philippine fishing boat (left) during the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) mission to bring supplies to fishermen near the China-controlled Scarborough Shoal or Bajo de Masinloc in the disputed South China Sea on Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024. The Philippines has accused the CCG of attempting to block the Philippine government vessel BRP Datu Sanday delivering supplies to fishermen, the second such alleged incident near a disputed reef in two weeks. (AFP/PCG)

the WPS have benefitted from the government's "LAYAG WPS" project or "LAYAG West Philippine Sea." LAYAG stands for Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yield and Economic Gains from WPS.

LAYAG WPS intends to further livelihood opportunities for the fisherfolk.

It stated that the nearly 400,000 fisherfolk who benefit from the project hail from Marinduque, Occidental Mindoro, Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, and Romblon (Mimaropa), Region I, Region III, and the National Capital Region (NCR). BFAR noted that these regions are within the vicinity of the WPS.

In July 2016, China's nine-dash line claims in the South China Sea were rejected by the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration. The case was brought by the Philippines based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

It was recalled that Filipino fisherfolk have cried foul over the alleged harassment they experienced from foreign vessels while they were fishing in Bajo de Masinloc or Scarborough in 2021.

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) had reported that a China Coast Guard ship (CCG) directed a military-grade laser light at a PCG vessel in Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal, West Philippine Sea on Feb. 6, 2023.

In December 2023, a CCG ship fired water cannon on BFAR vessel delivering supplies to fisherfolk communities in Bajo de Masinloc.

On Feb. 18, the BFAR disclosed reports from Filipino fishers that Chinese fishermen are allegedly using cyanide to destroy Bajo de Masinloc in an apparent bid to discourage Filipinos from fishing in its waters. (Jel Santos)





# El Niño damage to agri now at ₱357.4 M

Farmers to get hybrid rice seeds, high-value crops to mitigate impact

By JEL SANTOS

**T**he El Niño phenomenon continues to wreak havoc on the country, with damage to agriculture sector surging to ₱357.4 million and impacting nearly 8,000 farmers.

To mitigate the impact of El Niño, hybrid rice seeds have been distributed to non-vulnerable areas, while high-value crops like peanuts and legumes are being procured for farmers who want to shift to other plant variety that require less water.

As of Feb. 25, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said areas hit by El Niño are the Ilocos Region, Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan), Western Visayas, and Zamboanga Peninsula. ►7

**SCORCHED** – Walking on parched soil, farmer Raymond Dela Cruz inspects his rice field located near the Pulilan-Baliuag bypass road in Bulacan on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. According to Dela Cruz, irrigation came a month late for his farm that was supposed to have been replanted last January. (Mark Balmores)







## El Niño damage to agri now at ₱357.4 M 1◀

### Affected crops

Of the recorded damage, the DA said 9.54 percent is from rice, 16.98 percent from corn, and 3.47 percent from high-value crops (HVC).

The DA said the 5,011 hectares of rice that were damaged represent 0.52 percent of the entire target planted area, and the 11,480 metric tons (MT) production loss represents around 0.12 percent of the projected output for the dry cropping season this 2024.

In terms of corn, the DA reported that the dry spell has affected 1,263 hectares or 0.11 percent of the total target area planted and that the 2,897 MT output loss is equivalent to 0.06 percent of the target production for the 2024 dry cropping season.

### Potential losses

"Potential production losses from 6,523 hectares affected by the dry spell are estimated at 11,480 metric tons for palay, 2,897 MT for corn, and 225 MT for high-value crops," the agency said.

The agriculture department noted that most of the damage and losses on rice, corn, and HVC are in their reproductive stage.

According to the DA, the hybrid rice

seeds have been distributed to non-vulnerable areas in Western Visayas for maximization of production to compensate for the losses.

The agency said it will also provide various vegetable seeds in Western Visayas and Ilocos Region.

Once procured, the high-value crops will be given to Region IX farmers who choose to switch to other crops, the DA said.

The agriculture department said affected regional field offices will verify areas affected by drought to ascertain if installing Shallow Tube Wells (STWs) is feasible.

"However, there are no programmed funds available for STWs, particularly in rainfed areas in Region IX," it noted.

The DA added that water sources for irrigation in affected areas in Region VI rely on tributaries that are currently drying up due to drought.

### Assistance for affected farmers

"List of affected farmers will be endorsed to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) for other forms of assistance,

including financial support."

On Jan. 26, Agriculture spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said they are hopeful that the country's agricultural sector can still produce 20 million MT of palay this year despite the threat of El Niño.

The agriculture department is banking on government measures to mitigate the impact of El Niño.

De Mesa said the agency's primary water management interventions include the distribution of small-scale irrigation projects and solar irrigation systems to areas in the tail-end of the irrigation systems and other areas having difficulty accessing water.

He added that the agriculture department is conducting information dissemination in El Niño affected areas.

### Water-saving technique

During a meeting of Task Force El Niño on Feb. 12, Agriculture Assistant Secretary for Operations U-Nichols Manalo said the government will implement "Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD)" which uses less water for farming, and "Quick Turn Around" or QTA which allows immediate rice replanting

right after harvest.

He said AWD is a water-saving technique that rice farmers can implement to reduce their water use in irrigated fields.

QTA, on the other hand, is a method in which all rice farmers replant immediately after harvest rather than waiting for the months of the following planting season to begin.

Manalo stated that almost one million farmers have been contacted by the agriculture department to install water-saving technology in about 15,000 hectares of rice areas.

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

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

The aforementioned executive order mandates that the task group create a thorough plan for El Niño and La Niña readiness and recovery, to offer "systematic, holistic, and results-driven interventions" to help the public deal with and lessen their potentially catastrophic impacts.



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## Tobacco farmers sa Ilocos, apektado ng cigarette smuggling!

HINDI lang ang mga Pinoy ang pinapatay ng smuggled cigarettes dahil sa masamang sangkap nito kundi maging ang kabuhayan ng mga lokal na tobacco farmers sa Ilocos. Araguuyyyy! Sa ulat kasi ng **National Tobacco Administration (NTA)** umaabot sa 2.2 milyong Pinoy ay kumikita sa lokal na sigarilyo. Dahil naglipana ang smuggled cigarettes sa Pinas, lalo na sa Mindanao, abayyyyy bumababa din ang kita ng tobacco farmers.

Halos magdadalawang taon na sa trono si President Bongbong Marcos subalit wala pang binitiwang salita ito para matigil ang cigarette smuggling, kung saan aabot sa P60 bilyong buwis ang nawawala sa kaban ng gobyerno. Mismooooo! Hehehe! Kelangan pa bang i-memorize 'yan? Ano pa nga ba!

Kinumpirma ni kosang John Unson na nagkalat ang smuggled cigarettes sa Cotabato City. Aniya, tinatangkilik nga ito ng mga adik sa sigarilyo dahil mura subalit naiiba ang amoy at lasa. Sinabi kasi ng mga health experts na itong mga smuggled cigarettes ay may sangkap na toxic chemi-



## Dipuga

NI NON ALQUITRAN

cals na cadmium at lead na delikado sa kalusugan, kundi may iba pang halong di kanais-nais na bagay.

Ayon sa pagsusuri, itong smuggled at illegally manufactured cigarettes ay natuklasan ding may sangkap na insect parts, rat droppings, at minsan pa ay may dumi ng tao dahil hindi dumaan ang mga ito sa quality control. Dipu-gaaaaa!

Kaya pinagbawalan ni kosang Unson ang kanyang mga kaibigan, at kamag-anak na 'wag na manigarilyo ng smuggled cigarettes. Hehehe! Puwede namang tuluyan na nilang iwanan ang paninigarilyo dahil masama ito sa kalusugan, di ba mga kosa? Hehehe! Ambot sa kanding nga may bangs!

Ayon sa NTA, ang milyones na Pinoy na nakikinabang sa lokal na tabako ay 'yaong nga farmers, retailers, traders, manufacturers, vendors, at sari-sari stores owners. Sila po ay naka-depende lang sa tobacco industry at dahil hindi mapigil-pigil ang pagpasok ng illegal na sigarilyo sa Pinas, natural lang na pumadausdos ang kanilang kita, di ba mga

(Sundan sa pahina 5)



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### **Ibalik ang focus sa Agricultural High Schools**

Hinimok ni Senador Francis "Tol" Tolentino ang sektor ng edukasyon na ibalik ang pagtutok sa mga paaralang pang-agrikultura upang maisama ang mga kabataan sa pagpapalakas ng sektor ng agrikultura, pangisdaan, at aquaculture.

Sa kanyang regular na programa sa DZRH, nakipag-usap si Senator Tolentino kay **Department of Agriculture (DA) Undersecretary Asis Perez** upang bigyang-diin ang kahalagahan ng muling pagtutok sa agricultural high schools sa Pilipinas.

"Sa education sector, ang isang dapat mabigyan ng pansin-dito ay ang agricultural high schools kasi noong araw, napakaraming agricultural high schools," ani Tolentino.

Sinabi ng senador na kung maibabalik ang focus sa agricultural high schools, pagsapit ng kolehiyo ng mga mag-aaral at magkakaroon ng interes ang kabataan na mag-aral ng agrikultura.

"Ang nakikita kong missing link ay ang partisipasyon ng mga unibersidad — mga knowledge institutions. Sa fisheries, agricultural schools, maging research, dapat kasama na ang lahat ng mga estudyante. Kung hindi, magkakaroon ng disconnect," sabi ni Sen. Tol.

Sinang-ayunan ni Usec. Perez ang suhestyong ito ni Sen. Tolentino sa pagsasabing "Hindi lang po agriculture kundi pati fisheries at aquaculture dahil iyon ang source ng ating ulam. Ito po iyong ipu-pursue natin."  
(Malou Escudero)



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### Editorial

## May ginagawa ba ang NIA?

**N**AGKABITAK-BITAK na ang mga palayan sa Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro. Tuyung-tuyo na ang mga palay na bago pa lamang nabubuntis. Hindi na mapapakinabangan dahil sa kawalan ng tubig. Kahit pa umulan nang malakas na imposibleng mangyari dahil sa pananalasa ng El Niño, mahirap nang maisalba ang pananim partikular ang palay.

Umiiyak ang isang ginang sapagkat ang bukid lamang ang kanilang pinagkukunan ng ikinabubuhay. Ngayong wala na silang mapapakinabang, humihingi siya ng tulong sa pamahalaan. Nananawagan din ang mayor ng Bulalacao na tulungan sila ng pamahalaan. Idineklara na ang state of calamity sa Oriental Mindoro. Halos ganito rin ang nararanasan sa Occidental Mindoro na marami nang palayan ang natuyot dahil sa epekto ng El Niño.

Ayon sa Department of Agriculture (DA), umabot na sa P151.3 milyon ang pinsala sa agrikultura sa Western Visayas at Zamboanga Peninsula. Apektado ang kabuhayan ng 3,923 magsasaka sa mga nasabing lugar.

Inireport naman ng Office of Civil Defense (OCD) na walang probinsiya sa Luzon ang nakararanas ng tagtuyot dahil sa kawalan ng ulan. Ayon kay OCD Administrator Ariel Nepomuceno, ang mga probinsiya na nakararanas ng tagtuyot ay ang Apayao, Bataan, Cagayan, Cavite, Ilocos Norte, Kalinga at Zambales. Pati sa Palawan ay nararamdaman na umano ang bangis ng El Niño.

Nagbabala noon pang nakaraang taon ang National Water Resources Board (NWRB) na magtipid ang mamamayan sa paggamit ng tubig dahil sa kakaharapang tagtuyot dulot ng El Niño. Payo ni National NWRB Executive Director Seville David sa mamamayan na huwag mag-aksaya at i-recycle ang tubig. Dapat tumulong ang publiko o consumers sa water management.

Habang marami ang gumagawa ng paraan at solusyon, katak-taka namang walang nakikitang pagkilos sa National Irrigation Administration (NIA) na dapat manguna sa paghanap ng solusyon kung paano matutubigan ang mga natitigang na palayan sa kasalukuyan. Sila ang may responsibilidad para masuplayan ng tubig ang mga bukirin.

Ayon sa mga magsasaka, walang irrigation system o anumang patubig na isinagawa ang NIA. Wala ring mga ibinabaon na mga pump o poso ng tubig sa palayan. Tanong pa ng mga magsasaka, nasaan ang budget ng NIA para sa 2024 na nagkakahalaga ng P41.7 billion? Ang malaking budget ng NIA ay nakalaan para sa pagpapagawa, pagsasaayos, pagre-rehabilitate at para sa maintenance ng irrigation system.

Narito na ang El Niño subalit walang nakikitang pagkilos ang NIA. Marami na ang natutuyot na palayan pero dedma lang ang NIA?



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## Agri damage climbs to over P357M

**THE Department of Agriculture (DA)** is set for another rollout of aid to farmers as the country's agriculture suffered P357.38 million worth of damage and losses due to the strong and mature El Niño.

According to its latest bulletin released on Sunday, the DA said 7,668 farmers are affected in the Ilocos Region, Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan), Western Visayas, and Zamboanga Peninsula.

Majority of losses were recorded in rice production, affecting 11,480 metric tons worth P284.27 million followed by corn, 2,897 MT worth P60.70 million, and high-value crops (HVC), 225 MT, amounting to P12.41 million.

"The Department of Agriculture will distribute vegetable seeds in Western Visayas and Ilocos Regions as well as planting materials for high-value crops that require less water in the Zamboanga Peninsula," the DA-Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Operations Center said.

Besides the distribution of vegetable seeds and planting materials, the DA shall also promote the use of drought-resistant crop varieties and secure pest management operations in areas with low rainfall levels.

"The DA continuously adopts the alternate wetting and drying method that has reduced water consumption in rice fields. The agency is also considering (the) use of solar-powered irrigation systems to augment water supply in areas vulnerable to drought," it added.

The department earlier started its cloud-seeding operations in Cagayan Valley and distributed hybrid rice seeds and fertilizers to farmers in Western Visayas.

The DA, meanwhile, vowed to continuously help the agriculture sector in partnership with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), through endorsements for financial and livelihood assistance.

PNA





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# PEOPLES JOURNALS

Everybody's Newspaper



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## EDITORIAL

# Food security

LIKE in the past, food security remains to be one of the major concerns of President Marcos's six-year administration, which ends on June 30, 2028.

Doubtless, the more than 110 million Filipinos, notably the poor, welcomed this, knowing full well that there's that urgent need to win the battle against hunger.

Some quarters even fear that the El Nino weather phenomenon now raging in the Philippines, may make it hard for the government to achieve food security.

But others believe that the key to attaining food security is the successful implementation of the Marcos administration's "Gulayan sa Barangay Program."

A project of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), it calls for the establishment of "Community Gardens" throughout the country.

In his "Bagong Pilipinas" campaign, Marcos said: "Sa mga barangay, ang kaayusan at kalinisan ay gawin nating tuloy-tuloy. Ang bawat bakanteng lote...ay gawing halamanan at gulayan."

Before President Marcos came into power in 2022, there were only 2,000 "Community Gardens" in the country, according to DILG Undersecretary Chito Valmocina.

Today, there are now 27,000 "Community Gardens" under the auspices of barangay officials and employees.

Also involved in the "Gulayan sa Barangay" program are the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

Certainly, the people "now realize" the importance of setting up "Community Gardens" as the government pursues its multi-pronged food security programs.



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**EL NINO OMEN.** Farmer Raymond dela Cruz, 33, checks a portion of his dry rice field along the Pulilan-Baliuag Bypass Road in Bulacan on Monday. Dela Cruz said they harvested rice from the field last December and should have planted anew last January, but the water from irrigation just arrived this month – indicating a water shortage due to El Niño. **Manny Palmero**





## Why is my coffee so expensive?

### *Supply chain woes of SMEs*

I had recently been in touch with women coffee farmers from Mindanao and they all had the same issues about logistics. From the rugged road of their town to Davao City, a small farmer is at a loss on how to navigate the supply chain challenges. She can send her produce by bus and ask the conductor to drop the coffee off at a station in Pasay City, or go to a proper cargo agent. The cargo service will, of course, charge her volume weight, making her landed price uncompetitive.

Another woman farmer checked several ways to transport the produce: through a cargo agent, by hitching with a wingvan filled with bananas on its way to Balintawak market in Quezon City, or leaving it with a consolidator to figure out a way to Manila. I happened to check on their final decision: they decided on a truck that would travel three days from Davao to Manila, and one had to pay on a per sack basis.

Those are the options for the micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

Now, let's take a look at big business. They consolidate the goods in a container van, load it onto a barge or a boat, and do it the way multinationals and big corporations do. The result? Cheaper freight, and cheaper landed cost.

And for coffee, that is okay because green coffee is not perishable under a constant moisture level. But what about fruits? The truck the coffee farmer hitched with was full of crated green bananas on their way to Balintawak. Why should Balintawak in Luzon get bananas from Davao, you may ask? It is because the truck will be loaded with something to bring back from Manila — something not found in Davao. That is called trade. But for fresh fruits, this system does not support the “buy

#### MAP INSIGHTS CHIT U. JUAN

fresh, buy local” movement. I am sure the bananas were unripe, and then would be sprayed with ripening agents to be ready for the market when the tired bananas reached their destination.

As we were discussing this situation, I found out that since these indigenous people (IPs) own ancestral domains, they just give them up, sell their ancestral rights to big corporations, and stop being small farmers completely. Soon, we will no longer have small farmers because of these reasons: challenges in logistics, difficult access to markets, and lack of capital.

#### BUY LOCAL

With coffee as the exception because it is not as perishable as bananas or tomatoes, we should really encourage buying only from nearby or local sources. Davao must sell its produce to Davao or anywhere else in Mindanao which has a great road network. But try sending produce from Cagayan de Oro to Manila. Try anywhere to Manila. You would no longer wonder why only big companies get to transport fruits from Davao to Manila supermarkets. It is more expensive to ship anything from Mindanao to Manila.

Is consolidation the only answer?

What happens to small producers if this is the case? You have to submit to consolidators if you want to reach Manila, or survive by just selling to local buyers in which case you do not need to find transport and have additional costs.

I got a call from a farmer who said I could also pay a driver who would take the goods to a *sari-sari* store near Balintawak. What? And how would I meet the driver and pay him

for carrying my goods? Ingenious ways are the only recourse of a small producer. By chance, this farmer found a huge truck on its way to Manila which had room for her goods. The truck would take approximately three days to travel from Davao to Quezon City. If you loaded eggs, they would have hatched by now.

Of course, there are boats and cargo ships. But it costs a lot to ship and takes two to three weeks to be delivered to your doorstep. What can a small farmer do to participate in cross island trading?

Like I said, it is okay for coffee as it is not perishable in its raw state. But what about fruits and vegetables?

Here are two good examples of hope.

I found out about an app developed by a group which points you to a “*bagsakan*” or depot in Quezon province, and one would know in advance what vegetables or fruits are available by using the app. Now that is a good development for supply chain developers — to use technology to connect farmers to consumers, whether B to B or B to C. My friend said that using this app leads you to a depot in Sariaya, Quezon where the produce is gathered. Apparently, this depot was resurrected by former Agriculture Chief Proceso Alcala and now is managed professionally.

Another example is the Nueva Vizcaya Agricultural Terminal and Trading Center (NVAT) up north. A private company, Aboitiz Equity Ventures, Inc., has put up Fresh Depot which is a cold storage. This is a good development to prevent food waste and give farmers a leg up in maintaining the farmgate prices.

With these two developments in Luzon, what happens in Mindanao, the food basket of the country? With inter-island trade and logistics still inefficient, what will Min-





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NATHAN DUNLAP/UNSPASH

danao do with its produce? Maybe we can replicate the successful models of Luzon in the South and start planning to do this before food shortages and El Niño sets in.

We should think about improving supply chain facilities for the small farmer, the IPs, and not just let them give up in favor of big business. Our development must be inclusive so we can still have farmers in the next generation and ensure food security.

In the meantime, for coffee farmers, we need access to better and more efficient supply chain options. Or you will just have to pay for it in the price of your daily brew. Next time you order Sulu coffee, please do not complain about its high price. It came from a faraway land and is benefiting a small producer who, despite the odds, keeps farming coffee. The price of coffee is a function of labor plus a lot of distribution costs. ■

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## editorial

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# UN: Climate change and food insecurity threaten global peace

CLIMATE change and food insecurity are intertwined challenges that have far-reaching implications for global peace and security. The consequences of climate change, such as rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and changing rainfall patterns, directly impact food production systems, leading to decreased agricultural yields, disrupted supply chains, and increased food prices. These effects are particularly devastating in vulnerable regions where communities heavily rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and sustenance.

From the Associated Press: United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently warned that climate chaos and food crises are increasing threats to global peace, telling a high-level UN meeting that climate disasters imperil food production and "empty bellies fuel unrest." (**Read the story in BUSINESSMIRROR: "UN chief warns climate disasters and food crises threaten global peace: 'Empty bellies fuel unrest,' February 14, 2024).**

Guterres emphasized that climate disasters are jeopardizing food production worldwide, leading to empty bellies and fueling unrest. The devastating relationship between hunger and conflict is evident in numerous regions around the world. In war-torn areas like Gaza, Syria, and Myanmar, millions of people suffer from chronic hunger, exacerbating the instability and misery caused by ongoing conflicts. The consequences of climate change and conflict are intertwined, creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates human suffering.

Simon Stiell, the United Nations climate chief, cited the urgent need for immediate and sustained action to mitigate climate change and build resilience. With one in 10 people already experiencing chronic hunger, the situation will only worsen if climate change continues unabated. Greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced, and measures to adapt to a changing climate must be implemented promptly.

The United Nations Security Council, as the world's most powerful body responsible for international peace and security, has a crucial role to play in addressing these pressing issues. Regular updates on climate security risks should be requested, acknowledging that the problem will not simply disappear. The council must recognize the intricate connection between climate change, conflict, and food security and take meaningful steps to address them collectively.

Beth Bechdol, deputy director of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, said there's clear evidence that climate change increases the risks and drivers of conflict and instability. Disputes over land and water resources are intensified by changing climatic conditions, leading to tensions between herders and farmers, as seen in West and Central Africa. The impact of climate change extends beyond livestock to crop production, fishing, and forestry, all of which are essential for food security.

It is crucial for the international community to prioritize agriculture as a key solution to the growing threats posed by climate change, conflict, and their impact on food security. Sustainable agricultural practices, investment in resilient farming systems, and the empowerment of small-scale farmers are vital steps in building a more food-secure and climate-resilient world.

The impact of climate change and food insecurity on international peace and security cannot be ignored. These issues are intricately linked to the rule of law, democracy, and governance, as highlighted by President Mohamed Irfaan Ali of Guyana. The international community must recognize that addressing climate change and food crises is not only a matter of environmental concern but also a fundamental necessity for achieving global peace and stability.

The warnings issued by the United Nations leadership regarding climate change, conflict, and food insecurity demand immediate attention and action. The scarcity of food resources and the resulting hunger and malnutrition can destabilize societies and fuel conflicts. The international community, particularly the UN Security Council, must prioritize these interconnected challenges and work together to mitigate climate change, address food crises, and build a more peaceful and sustainable future for the eight billion people on the planet.





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# PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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**DRY LAND** A portion of a rice field in Pulilan, Bulacan, has started to dry up on Monday amid the intense heat and lack of rainfall due to the El Niño weather phenomenon. The state weather bureau, in an advisory, says a "strong and mature" El Niño is expected to continue through February. —GRIG C. MONTEGRANDE

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## On energy and food security (part 1)

The month of February 2024 marks my 17th year in the power industry, which started when I was appointed as the President and CEO of SN Aboitiz Power in 2007. At that time, the Company participated in the reforms initiated by the Electric Power Industry Reform Act or EPIRA to acquire the operations of Magat Hydro located in Ramon, Isabela and Alfonso Lista, Ifugao. We consider these privatization efforts to be a once in a lifetime opportunity as these assets are quite valuable to the grid.

Recently, I was made aware that Magat dam's reservoir to start the new year is more or less at 182 meters above sea level, way below its maximum water depth of 193 meters. This means that there is already lower water allocation for Magat Hydro, as well as the irrigation of nearby paddy-growing service areas.

This is not new. Managing the scarce resource of water for hydro power generation and irrigation systems is a challenging yet understated endeavor that both sectors try to reconcile every year, especially during the hot summer season. As someone in the power industry, my profession demands that I think about how the supply of water will affect the operation of the country's hydro power plants. After all, hydro comprises about 13% of our nation's installed electricity generation capacity and is responsible for about 9% of gross power generation in gigawatt hours<sup>1</sup>.

This strengthened my appreciation of the merits of having a diversified energy mix. When the water supply is lacking, predictably during the summer months and especially amidst an El Niño, we can look to other energy sources like coal, natural gas, and/or solar to help fill in the gaps in generation to continuously power our businesses, communities, and households.

As a family man, my instinct is to also think about how the water supply will affect the food on our table; especially rice, which is a staple in every Filipino home. Water is also very important to agriculture, with a well-managed field requiring about 2,600 liters to produce one kilo of rice.

In Magat's case, the facilities are purposely built to provide water for irrigation for roughly 85,000 hectares of irrigated land in Isabela, Ifugao and neighboring provinces.

Hence, it is essential that we work closely with the National Irrigation Administration, especially this year when a prolonged dry spell is expected to exacerbate the situation.

The point I'm trying to make is that the supply of water directly affects both food production and electricity generation. The same trend is observed in other parts of the economy as other resources are also scarce and have inherent opportunity costs. Then comes climate change which adds more pressure to an already complex and strained system of supply and demand.

When you think of it, Magat—being a multi-purpose dam—is a perfect representation of the relationships between water, energy, agriculture, and climate change. It captures the main theme of this column, which strives to point out connections across complex social realities and understand that things in life aren't as disjointed as we sometimes make it out to be. When even a single string on a guitar is off tune, it is noticeable as it permeates into the sound produced by a strum.

Water, energy, agriculture, and climate change determine life and death because food, shelter, and personal security are among man's most basic needs.

I have said that I only know two things: that climate change is real and that our global society needs to transition to cleaner sources of energy. The reality of climate change has brought to the fore how countries design their respective energy mixes.

Consistent with my point, an energy transition is more complex than just adding more and more renewable energy and removing traditional power plants. An energy system—like Magat—does not exist in a vacuum. It is ingrained in the ecosystem that it supports,



### CHORDS

EMMANUEL V. RUBIO,  
ABOITIZ POWER CORP. PRESIDENT AND  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

touching on multiple socio-economic realities and influenced by each respective local context.

In our own context, the Philippines needs continuous, stable, reliable, and secure electricity for the attainment of man's most basic needs and beyond. This means counteracting the intermittencies brought about by the influx of variable renewable energy sources like solar and wind through complementary traditional power sources, as well as modern energy storage systems, that can do the job.

Another scarce critical resource to both energy and food security is land. A solar farm requires large tracts of land to capture as much sunlight as possible and convert it into electricity. In the Philippines, a hectare of land can be equivalent to either a megawatt of solar power (generated under ideal conditions) or about four metric tons of rice each year. Such is a tradeoff that we need to think about, and it will be the subject of the next edition of Chords.

###

*Chords is the monthly column of Emmanuel V. Rubio—biker, music lover, and President and CEO of AboitizPower. It references Manny's passion for playing the guitar and how the combination of notes & the subtleties of strumming produce unique melodies when the sounds of individual strings are blended together, much like the elements of industry, corporations, and life.*

<sup>1</sup> Source: [https://www.doe.gov.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/energy\\_statistics/01\\_Summary%20of%202022%20Power%20Statistics.pdf](https://www.doe.gov.ph/sites/default/files/pdf/energy_statistics/01_Summary%20of%202022%20Power%20Statistics.pdf)



The Magat dam — which caters to 85,000 hectares of irrigated land and houses the 360 MW Magat hydroelectric power plant — is a perfect representation of the relationship between energy and food security, and how both are affected by climate change.





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## Rise in rice prices inevitable due to surging cost of oil – PBBM

By BETHEENA UNITE

High prices of rice in the Philippines are inevitable, President Marcos said in response to a question of a letter sender if “BBM” stands for “Bigas Biglang Mahal.”

The President explained that it is unavoidable to see a rise in the prices of rice in the country, considering the increasing prices of oil that impacts cost production. ► 7

## Rise in rice prices inevitable due to surging cost of oil – PBBM 1◀

He said dealing with rice prices is not only a serious problem in the Philippines, but also in other Asian countries, including top rice producers Vietnam and Thailand that are also affected by the “external shocks” such as the movement of oil prices, and other issues.

“Hindi natin maiwasan na makita na

talagang nagiging problema ang pagtaas ng presyo ng bigas dito sa Pilipinas. Pero kung titignan po natin kahit na yung mga nag-e-export na mga bansa ay tumataas din ang presyo, halos katumbas lang ng pagtaas dito sa Pilipinas (It is inevitable to see that the rising prices of rice in the Philippines is becoming a serious problem.

But if you look at other rice-exporting countries, the prices of rice are also almost equivalent to the Philippines),” Marcos said.

He, however, assured that the government is doing all it can to ensure sufficient supply of rice in the market and hoped that the prices would eventually stabilize.

“Ginagawa natin lahat upang ang produksyon natin ay maging sapat na hindi na tayo nag-iimport, mababawasan ang mga inputs, kung tawagin para sa ating mga farmer at sana naman ay ma-

stabilize man lang natin yung presyo ng bigas (We are doing everything we can to ensure ample production so we would not have to import and decrease inputs, as well as be able to stabilize prices of rice),” Marcos said.

The chief executive answered several questions and letters received by the Office of the President from “Bahay Ugnayan,” ranging from politics, rice prices, and jeepney modernization program, among other national issues through his vlog on Sunday, Feb. 25.





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# PBBM: RICE PRICE HIKE A GLOBAL ISSUE

THE issue on the prices of rice is not in the Philippines alone but in the whole of Asia.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos made the statement in response to a question from a letter sender to the Office of the President through Bahay Ugnayan, asking if "BBM" stands for "Bigas Biglang Mahal."

Marcos clarified the increase in prices of rice is experienced globally and not specific to the Philippines.

"Hindi natin maiwasan na makita, talagang nagiging problema ang pagtaas ng presyo ng bigas dito sa Pilipinas. Pero, kung titignan ponatin kahit na'yung mga nag e-export na mga



bansa ay tumataas din ang presyo nila, halos katumbas lang ng pagtaas dito sa Pilipinas," the President answered.

The President said studies were made to observe

the prices of rice in the Philippines compared to the top rice exporting countries like Viet Nam and Thailand, it showed "external shocks" such as the movement of oil prices has

made an effect, proving the problem affects the region.

President Marcos assured the government is doing all it can to ensure sufficient supply of rice and to stabilize prices of rice in the country.

"Ginagawa natin lahat upang naman ang produksyon natin ay magiging sapat na hindi na tayo nag-iimport mababawasan ang mga inputs, kung tawagin para sa ating mga farmer at sana naman ay ma-stabilize manlang natin 'yung presyo ng bigas," he said.

The President stressed the government is doing all it can to ensure a sufficient supply of rice in the market. **PCO**



# Malaya Business Insight

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## Corn, soybeans recover

SINGAPORE- Chicago corn gained ground on Monday, with prices underpinned by short-covering after the market dropped to its lowest level in more than three years last week, weighed down by ample world supplies and expectations of a bumper harvest in South America.

Soybeans rose for the first time in four sessions, while wheat recouped some of the last session's losses.

"Farmers are holding large stocks of corn and they will be selling in the market," said one Singapore-based grains trader. "Prices are likely to come under further pressure."

The most-active corn contract on the Chicago Board of Trade

(CBOT) rose 0.3 percent to \$4.14-3/4 a bushel, having dropped to its lowest since November 2020 last week.

Soybeans added 0.3 percent to \$11.45 a bushel and wheat gained 0.5 percent at \$5.71-3/4 a bushel.

Larger inventories of corn, mainly used to feed animals and as a biofuel, are providing headwinds to prices, which have dropped almost 12 percent so far in 2024.

US farmers held a whopping 7.83 billion bushels of corn in storage bins on their farms as of Dec. 1, the most ever for that date and up 16 percent from a nine-year low in December 2022, according to US government data. - Reuters





## Indonesia allocates 1.6M metric tons for additional rice imports this year



A worker arranging a rice sack at a warehouse in Jakarta. (Reuters Photo)

JAKARTA- Indonesia has allocated an additional quota of 1.6 million metric tons of rice for import for this year on top of 2 million tons previously approved, an official said on Monday, anticipating lower domestic output in the January-March harvest.

The trade ministry is working to issue the import permits for the additional allocation, ministry official Arif Sulistiyo said during a weekly government meeting streamed live.

Indonesia imported 3.06 million tons of the grain in 2023, close to a record.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy is expected to produce 32 million tons of rice this year, up from 30.9 million tons in 2023, but production in the early months is expected to be disrupted by the impact of last year's drought.

January-March rice output is expected to be 2.82 million tons lower compared to the same month last year, Arif said.

Meanwhile, at retail level, rice has sold with prices above the government-set cap due to concerns of supply.

Indonesian farmer Wardiyono typically starts planting his small rice field in November but this

season he began only in January, when rains finally arrived after months of drought caused by an especially strong El Nino weather phenomenon.

"Normally it rains daily in January. This year, it is different," Wardiyono, 58, said by phone from Java's Klaten regency south of the city of Surakarta. Wardiyono, who has one name like many Indonesians, said some days it was completely dry and for several days it has been just short spells of rain.

The planting delays and lack of rain Wardiyono is experiencing point to the likelihood of a worse-than-expected rice harvest and higher imports in 2024 in the world's fourth-largest consumer of the staple. The Indonesian government is expecting the usual March-April peak harvest to be delayed by a month because of the below normal precipitation in Java, the country's key rice growing region.

Lower Indonesian rice output may tighten supplies at a time prices are already near their highest since 2008 amid lower output in top exporters Thailand, Vietnam and India.

The London-based Interna-

tional Grains Council forecasts another decline in Indonesian rice output this year after El Nino curtailed the 2023 harvest, IGC analyst Peter Clubb said.

"El Nino has had quite a sizeable impact on Indonesia, leading to much reduced rainfall. This will likely see Indonesia's imports remain above average in 2024," he said.

Indonesia's initial forecast for 32 million metric tons of rice output in 2024 has been undercut by predictions that rice output in January and February is expected to drop 46 percent from a year ago to 2.25 million tons.

Typically, planting for Indonesia's main rice crop begins with the start of the wet season in October, with harvesting in February-April. The country produces two rice crops, with the harvest during the October-April wet season accounting for 55 percent of annual output.

Signs of the expected 2024 decline are apparent with the farm ministry reporting the area planted with rice in the fourth quarter of 2023 dropped to 2.91 million hectares (7.2 million acres), below the target of 3.53 million hectares (8.7 million acres). - Reuters