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Tiu Laurel names new DA head of policy panel

By Othel V. Campos

DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. has designated lawyer Paz Benavidez II as assistant secretary for policy and regulations.

Benavidez will head the secretariat of the DA oversight panel on the issuance of regulations, a body created in compliance with provisions of the Anti-Red Tape Act.

Prior to Benavidez's new assignment, Tiu Laurel issued Administrative Order 1 which sets guidelines on the conduct of Regulatory Impact Assessment, or RIA, for proposed DA regulations.

Undertaking RIA, according to ARTA, will ensure regulations are subjected to proper consultations and evidence-based analysis before their issuance.

The RIA process is expected to help government agencies, local government units, and other government instrumentalities to pass sound and effective regulations that provide the most benefit to Filipinos.



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'Probe past NFA admins' billion-peso palay sales'

Farmers' group Federation of Free Farmers national manager Raul Montemayor asked Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. to include in the ongoing probe on the National Food Authority (NFA)'s questionable rice sale to some traders the alleged billions of pesos worth of fresh palay sold during previous administrations.

"What happened during the previous administrations (of NFA) should also be probed as based on the reports we received, it was even worse. It was bigger, billions of pesos worth. The stocks were freshly purchased and sold to traders and made it appear (that the palay) were sold to traders three or four months after to make it appear

these were deteriorating stocks," Montemayor said.

He added that the whistleblower, NFA Assistant Administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan should also be questioned as he was assigned in marketing prior to the appointment of embattled NFA administrator Roderico Bioco.

"During the previous years, freshly purchased *palay* (from the farmers) were sold to private traders and under the scheme, the documents from the NFA were released three months or four months later," Montemayor said.

Laurel has instructed Bioco and Pagayunan to both take a leave of absence or be suspended.

— Bella Cariaso



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Hog raisers back MAV suspension

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE National Federation of Hog Farmers Inc. (NatFed) supports the suspension of the minimum access volume (MAV) for pork imports, saying that local prices of the commodity will not increase once the MAV is removed.

NatFed Chairman Chester Warren Tan said they would support whatever the decision of the Department of Agriculture (DA) on MAV, adding that they do not see any changes whether it will be suspended or not.

"We agree with the [Agriculture]

secretary because whether with MAV or without, it seems like we're not seeing any changes," Tan said.

Last month, the DA said it was reviewing plans to suspend the MAV on pork and corn to curb the country's agricultural imports.

The NatFed chairman, mean-

while, said that the department might want to try suspending the MAV first to see if there would be any difference with or without it. Contrary to meat importers' claim, Tan also said prices would not increase once the MAV was removed.

"The price won't increase because the MAV was removed, that prices will rise and inflation everything, that's not true," he said.

The Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (Pcafi) earlier suggested eliminating the MAV for poultry and pork imports, noting that it has become useless.

Pcafi President Danilo Fausto said that the volume of importa-

tion for chicken is more than 15 times the MAV. He added that removing MAV will result in a "level playing field among importers and importers vis a vis local producers."

Citing government's data, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said that as of end-September last year, total hog inventory declined to 9.86 million heads from 10.1 million in the same period in 2022 due to the African swine fever (ASF).

In 2021, the country's hog inventory was logged at 9.94 million heads; in 2020, it was at 12.8 million hogs.

Most of the reduction came from small holds whose inventory dropped to 7.18 million in 2022 from a high of 9.44 million in 2020.

"ASF has immensely impacted our hog industry and caused triple effects throughout the agricultural sector. Livelihoods of countless farmers and industry workers are at stake," said Tiu Laurel.

He added that a vaccine for hog disease will be available in the country before year-end.

"The good news is there are already vaccines that are on the way that may be accredited within the year by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) with assistance from

DA," Tiu Laurel said. "Hopefully, we can eradicate ASF by next year."

He added that a Vietnamese and an American company are currently seeking accreditation from the FDA for their ASF vaccines. Additionally, another Vietnamese company and a Thai firm are planning to apply for approval for their vaccines.

"The hog industry remains not just a source of income but a cornerstone of food security and a vital part of our livelihood. Hogs have long been a mainstay for Filipino agriculture, providing sustenance and economic opportunities to countless households across the nation," said Tiu Laurel.



'Linkages to cut PHL reliance on pork imports'

BY BUTCH FERNANDEZ

X@butchfBM

HOG producers' link and network with institutional markets, such as restaurants and hotels, will lessen their dependence on imported pork, according to Senator Cynthia A. Villar.

"While recognizing the Filipinos' love for pork," Villar said, "it is imperative for our hog producers to provide consumers with good quality pork."

The senator affirms "the love for pork of our kababayans will remain so we need to find a good source of juicy, tender pork with the ideal meat-to-fat ratio at affordable price," Villar noted in her speech during the National Federation of Hog Farmers (NatFed) National Pig Day Celebration in Quezon City, which kicked off on March 1 and will run up to March 5.

The NatFed also set a Guinness Record for the most number of pork dishes on display and to be served. **(Related story: <https://business-mirror.com.ph/2024/03/02/phl-sets-new-guinness-world-record-for-most-variety-of-pork-dishes-on-display/>)**

During the opening of the Hog

Festival event led by NatFed, the participants served 341 pork dishes. The Philippines surpassed the minimum 300 pork dishes with 313 qualified dishes following the records guidelines. The guidelines include the following: the dishes must be made from pork, the dishes must contain at least three kilograms of pork and each dish must be "unique."

The chairperson of the Senate committee on agriculture related that Filipinos consumed 15 kilograms of pork, 11.6 kg of chicken and 3 kg of beef a year.

"We Pinoys love to eat meat particularly pork meat. We offer a variety of pork dishes. Some of the favorite pork dishes are lechon, barbecue, adobo, pochoero, sinigang na baboy, tokwa at baboy, binagoongan, sisig, and crispy pata, among others."

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, as of September 2023, the top five regions with the highest volume of hog production at live weight are Calabarzon, Central Luzon, Northern Mindanao, Central Visayas, Davao Region and Zamboanga Peninsula.

"And about 67.5 percent of the country's swine population came from small hold farms, while the

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A broader look at today's business

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SENATOR Cynthia Villar and QC Mayor Joy Belmonte enjoy recipes from the participating booths at the HOGs Festival which broke the Guinness record on largest hogs recipes in one day at Gateway Mall, Araneta Center. BERNARD TESTA

remaining 29.2 percent and 3.3 percent were from commercial and semi-commercial farms, respectively," Villar said.

However, the senator noted that African swine fever (ASF) continues to threaten hog production in the Philippines.

Vaccine, bills

THE hog sector registered P200 billion in losses since ASF cases were recorded in 2019.

In November 2023, the Bureau of Animal Industry said only 11

provinces out of the 82 remain ASF-free. They are Batanes, Occidental Mindoro, Palawan, Bohol, Siquijor, Biliran, Bukidnon, Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.

While the Philippines awaits the approval of a vaccine against ASF, Villar said "we can only rely on our good animal husbandry practices in preventing disease and disease-causing agents to spread for our hog farmers to earn, attain their maximum farm yield, protect the consumer food supply by making available clean and safe hogs for

slaughter."

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiù Laurel Jr. expressed optimism that the ASF vaccine be available in the country before yearend.

Laurel said over the weekend that a Vietnamese and an American company are now seeking Food and Drug Administration accreditation for their ASF vaccines while another Vietnamese firm and Thai firm are also planning to apply for vaccine approval.

"The good news is there are already vaccines that are on the way that may be accredited within the year by the FDA with assistance from DA," he said. "Hopefully, we can eradicate ASF by next year."

ASF has significantly reduced local swine production, with yearend inventory falling to 9.94 million heads in 2021, from a record high 12.8 million hogs in 2020.

Most of the reduction came from small holds whose inventory dropped to 7.18 million in 2022 from a high of 9.44 million in 2020. At the end of September last year, total inventory declined to 9.86 million heads from 10.1 million in the same period in 2022.

Laurel said the DA is collaborating with scientific institutions

and industry experts "to drive the development of innovative solutions for ASF management and eventual eradication." He said the agency is also engaging other nations to draw from their experiences and best practices in successfully managing, if not eradicating, ASF.

"We understand the financial strain on our farmers and we're committed to providing financial assistance and support programs. Additionally, extensive public awareness campaigns is a priority to educate farmers, industry stakeholders, and the public about preventive measures against ASF. Knowledge is a powerful tool, and through awareness, we aim to empower everyone to contribute to the eradication of ASF."

Villar also renewed her call to stop agricultural smuggling to protect local hog producers. She is asking both houses of Congress to finish the bicameral conference on Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Bill.

She urged Congress to pass the Livestock Poultry and Dairy Bill and the Corn Bill soonest to finance the strengthening of the industries from tariffs collected on imported animal products and feeds.



DA chief announces additional appointments

AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. has designated lawyer Paz Benavidez II as assistant secretary for policy and regulations.

One of the primary tasks of Benavidez will be to head the secretariat of the Department of Agriculture's (DA) oversight panel on the issuance of regulations, a body created in compliance with provisions of the Anti-Red Tape Act.

Prior to lawyer Benavidez's new assignment, Laurel issued Administrative Order 1 which sets guidelines on the conduct of Regulatory Impact Assessment, or RIA, for proposed DA regulations.

Undertaking RIA, according to ARTA, will ensure regulations are subjected to

proper consultations and evidence-based analysis before their issuance. The RIA process is expected to help government agencies, local government units and other government instrumentalities to pass sound and effective regulations that provide the most benefit to Filipinos.

The administrative order issued by the agri chief also sets up a Regulatory Clearinghouse System to subject draft regulatory policies and guidelines to review. The DA's Policy Research Service will conduct the initial review before forwarding it to the Assistant Secretary for Policy and Regulations to ensure they are consistent with other regulations.

The Undersecretary for Policy, Planning and Regulations has been designated

to exercise oversight functions in the formulation, amendments, or revisions of regulatory policies or issuances to ensure harmonization of DA regulations.

Also appointed by Laurel were:

■ Assistant Secretary Noel Padre as assistant secretary for Planning and Project Development;

■ Arthur Dayrit, Ph.D., as regional technical director for operations at the Regional Field Office (RFO) 3;

■ Dr. Irene Adion as officer-in-charge of the Regional Technical Director for Research, Regulations and Integrated Laboratory Sessions at RFO 3;

■ Fidel Libao as regional technical

director for operations at RFO 4-A;

■ Celso Olido, Ph.D., as regional technical director for research and regulation at RFO 4-B;

■ Maria Melba Wee as regional technical director for operations at RFO 9;

■ Maria Gemma Genaldo as officer-in-charge of regional technical director for research, regionals and integrated lab services at RFO 9;

■ Engr. Redeliza Gruezo as officer-in-charge of regional technical director for research and regulations, in concurrent capacity as chief, field operations division at RFO 4-A;

■ Lawyer and director 4 Jennilyn Dawayan as regional executive director at RFO Cordillera Administrative Region; and

■ Vener Dalig as regional technical director for operations at RFO 4-B.

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Kalkalan dahil sa NFA buffer stock

Hinimok ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., ang mga opisyal ng National Food Authority (NFA) na iniimbestigahan dahil sa umano'y hindi tamang pagbebenta ng NFA buffer stock rice sa subsidized na presyo na mag-voluntary leave of absence. Sabi nga, sinuman ay ipinalalagay na inosente kung isasaalang-alang ang palitan ng mga alegasyon sa loob ng NFA.

Nagkaroon ng umano'y pagbebenta ng 75,000 sako ng NFA rice nang walang public bidding. Kabilang umano ito sa mahigit P93.7 milyong halaga ng NFA rice, na ibinebenta sa mga piling miller at mangangalakal sa presyong P25 kada kilo. Abangan.



'At least 195 Chinese vessels a day in SCS'

Think tank: 183 China ships swarmed Mischief Reef in July

THE Chinese maritime militia is as active as ever in the West Philippine Sea, deploying an average of 195 vessels a day across 10 features in the South China Sea—and a high of 183 ships at the Philippines' Panganiban Reef (Mischief Reef) alone last July—a Washington-based think tank's recent report showed.

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) noted the "dramatic shift" of China's maritime militia deployment in a report it published on Feb. 28, including in areas within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

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'At least...

From A1

For the entire 2023, AMTI tracked Chinese ships deployed across the South China Sea using its satellite imagery, specifically in the following features: Fiery Cross Reef, Hughes Reef, Iroquois Reef, Subi Reef, Thitu Reefs/Sandy Cay, Whitsun Reef, and Gaven Reef.

The tracking extended to Philippine maritime features Mischief Reef (Pan-ganiban), Scarborough Shoal (Bajo de Masinloc), and Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin).

An average of 195 Chinese militia vessels, sized between 45 to 65 meters, were observed across these locations last year, the think tank noted.

This represented "an increase of 35 percent from AMTI's last observation of the militia over a 12-month period in 2021-2022," the report said.

"This overall increase was accompanied by a dramatic shift in vessels to Mischief Reef in the summer of 2023: over 180 militia ships were observed gathered in imagery from July after only

a minimal presence in the months prior, a number confirmed by Philippine authorities in reporting at the time," it added.

The reason for the greater presence of Chinese vessels in the Mischief Reef from the peak of only 37 vessels in October 2021, was unclear, AMTI said.

The largest consistent groupings of militia vessels were spotted at Hughes Reef and Whitsun Reef. There was also a "persistent militia presence" near China's outpost at Gaven Reef, and smaller boat groups were observed at the reefs east of Thitu Reef and at Iroquois Reef, it added.

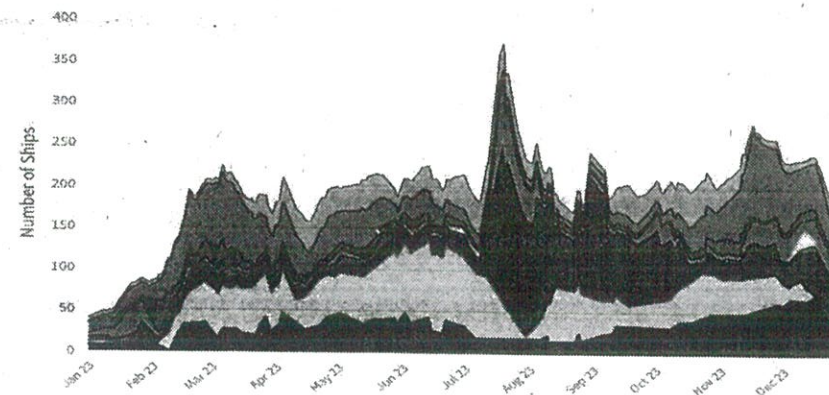
"While it is true that the militia vessels seen active at Second Thomas Shoal typically operate out of Mischief, deploying to Second Thomas in response to Philippine resupply missions, the summer surge at Mischief appears mostly unrelated to those efforts," the report added.

"Satellite imagery suggests that only a minority of the boats at Mischief were the professional type seen supporting Chinese blockade efforts at Second Thomas, and the peak occurred months before militia counts during those mis-

Chinese Maritime Militia Vessels by Location

Estimates based on Planet Labs and Maxar satellite imagery

Legend: Fiery Cross Reef, Hughes Reef, Iroquois Reef, Mischief Reef, Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, Subi Reef, Thitu Reefs/Sandy Cay, Whitsun Reef, Gaven Reef



sions began to rise."

Last December, a Philippine aerial mission to the Mischief Reef using an aircraft of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) was met by flares China fired from the maritime feature.

Still, the patrol managed to capture images of the facilities that China had

built on the reef well within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.

Seen from above were the infrastructure projects China built at the Mischief Reef including a hangar, building projects, a sports complex, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and eight basketball courts, among others.

With Vince Lopez



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How to address corruption and incompetence in the DA

There are two main factors why we have not achieved true agriculture development: corruption and incompetence.

Because of corruption, a big chunk of the Department of Agriculture's (DA's) already meager resources are wasted. The Commission on Audit reported that one-third of the DA budget was lost to unliquidated and unexplained expenses in the years 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Last Jan. 5, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. announced the restoration of an effective practice implemented by the Philippine Council of Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF). It requires regional executive directors (REDs) of the DA to provide the private sector-led regional agriculture and fisheries councils with a complete list of DA-funded projects. This transparency and accountability prevented and reduced corruption.

Corruption risk

Alyansa Agrikultura reported to the Secretary that after five weeks, several REDs had not complied with the order. Another order was sent, and total compliance was achieved as of Feb. 26. The delay indicates

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

that corruption risk must be strictly monitored.

On the second issue of competence, lack of it may cause even more harm than corruption. A business leader was asked: "If your house is burning, who do you prefer—an honest incompetent fireman, or a competent corrupt one?" The answer was expected.

DA employees are generally very competent. But if they follow directives from incompetent officials, performance will suffer.

Professor Peter Drucker once told us: "It is important to do things right. But it is more important [to] do the right things." If we do things wrongly by being corrupt, progress will definitely suffer. But there will even be less progress if we follow the wrong direction.

We have been doing sub-optimal resource distribution for years. We use 4 percent of our budget for poultry and livestock, which contribute 30 percent of our agriculture production value; and 1 percent for

high value crops (HVCs), which contribute 18 percent of our value. Thailand and Vietnam funded their HVCs properly and look at where they are now.

It is time we change. First, there has been too little private sector involvement in our agriculture governance.

Tiu Laurel is remedying this with significant private sector participation for a more competent 2025 budget formulation. PCAF will help in soliciting valuable input from three sectors: farmers and fisherfolk, agribusiness, and science and academe.

48 subsectors

One key input source is the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. Since Danilo Fausto became its president in September 2018, he has admirably organized 48 agriculture subsectors, each with a successful champion, to recommend agriculture improvements. The champions can be harnessed to discuss each sector's actual needs in small focused groups. This is a necessary addition to large group deliberations where budget recommendations are decided without the competent analysis done beforehand.

Second, the private sector should be allowed to join the DA

in explaining to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) certain key proposals. In the past, the DBM would cut DA budget items because these proposals were not explained well.

Alyansa Agrikultura had proposed this before. Though the DBM agreed, the DA disagreed.

For example, the market management information and farmer consolidation and clustering components were downgraded for this year. The private sector believes this could have been avoided if they were given the chance to explain.

Tiu Laurel is exercising strong political will in addressing the twin issues of corruption and incompetence. He says he will succeed only if he gets private sector involvement and participation.

The private sector must now respond with commitment if progress is to happen. **INQ**



The author is Agriwatch chair, former secretary of presidential flagship programs and projects, and former undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade and Industry. Contact is agriwatch_phil@yahoo.com

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PH WANTS OUT OF FATF LIST

'SURGERY' A MUST TO ROOT OUT SHADY COMPANIES, SAYS SEC

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) defended its recent move to suspend nearly 118,000 corporations for their noncompliance with regular reporting requirements, which comes amid its own heightened efforts to combat financial crime.

"It needs to be more than incremental steps. It should be surgery," SEC Chair Emilio Aquino said on Friday.

Aquino said they were also boosting corporate compliance when it comes to the filing of beneficial ownership reports to unmask the true owners of com-

panies. A beneficial owner refers to the person who ultimately owns and controls a corporation instead of the legal owner.

The opaque ownership of corporations makes it more difficult to trace criminal activities such as money laundering and terrorism financing, one of the factors keeping the Philippines in the so-called "gray list" of Paris-based watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

"Part of laundering is layering and if you are a bad guy trying to hide your money, you layer," Aquino explained.

He said the SEC was aim-

ing for a "tall order" compliance rate of 65 percent for the filing of beneficial ownership reports. This was after raising the figure to 50.7 percent from around 20 percent in the past.

The SEC on Friday expanded its fight versus laundering through the signing of data sharing agreements with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, Insurance Commission, Cagayan Economic Zone Authority, National Bureau of Investigation, and Department of Justice.

Other signatories were the Philippine Center on Transnational Crime, Department of

Agriculture, Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine Economic Zone Authority.

The failure of the Philippines to move out of the gray list could result in the country being downgraded to the FATF black list, which would result in higher fees for beneficiaries of overseas Filipino workers.

"The President wants us to get out of the gray list. Those that will immediately be affected [by a black list downgrade] are our OFWs who are remitting constantly," Aquino said.

—MIGUEL R. CAMUS INQ



No sugar MAV this year – SRA

By **JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS**

The government did not allow the importation of sugar at a lower tariff rate in the current minimum access volume (MAV) year since the country has ample stocks to meet domestic consumption, the Sugar Regulatory Administration said.

SRA administrator and CEO Pablo Luis Azcona said the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** decided not to open a sugar MAV program since domestic stocks are enough to meet the requirements of both households and industrial users.

The decision was made in August 2023 by then Senior Agriculture Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban, a few months before the DA opened its call for applications for the MAV year 2024 last November.

Any imports made under the MAV mechanism will have a lower tariff than imports that enter the country outside the MAV as part of the country's trade commitments.

In the case of sugar, imports within MAV have a 50 percent tariff while those outside

MAV are levied with 65 percent tariff.

However, any sugar imports – whether within or outside MAV – from ASEAN member-countries will have to pay only a five percent tariff under existing trade agreements.

The country's MAV year begins on Feb. 1 and ends on Jan. 31 of the following year. The DA started issuing last week the import certificates for the commodities with MAV this year.

"The problem with the MAV is that it is a program separate from the SRA and the arrival schedule is February to (January of the following next year) – which hits our local produce," Azcona told **The STAR**.

The absence of a sugar MAV program this year would provide price support to local farmers who have been reeling from declining farmgate prices of sugarcane, he said.

Prior to last year, the government has not opened the sugar MAV since 2002 since the country has sufficient stocks of the commodity during February, which is the start of the MAV

calendar that coincides with the peak milling season.

However, the government was forced to open the sugar MAV last year because of the need to augment domestic stocks to meet demand from food manufacturers and beverage makers as well as to arrest skyrocketing retail prices.

The 64,050-metric ton sugar MAV last year was fully utilized.

In December last year, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. told lawmakers the country might need to import a "conservative" volume of 200,000 MT of sugar this year.

Azcona has emphasized that there is no plan and need to open a sugar import program in the near term since the country has sufficient supply.

Latest SRA data showed that as of Feb. 18, total physical sugar stock stood at 583,282 MT, up by 38.61 percent from last year's 420,821.78 MT. Meanwhile, total refined sugar stock was at 542,341.85 MT, more than double the 202,679.45 MT recorded last year.

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'No reason for pork price surge in Visayas, Mindanao'

By **BELLA CARIASO**

There is no reason for the spike in retail prices of pork in the Visayas and Mindanao, as the prevailing live weight cost is only P180 per kilo, farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) said over the weekend.

In a radio interview, SINAG chairman Rosendo So was reacting to complaints from consumers that the retail price of pork in Visayas and Mindanao has reached P400 per kilo.

So added that the retail price of pork shoulder in Visayas and Mindanao should be P280 per kilo.

According to So, the live

weight price of pork in Luzon is higher at P195 per kilo amid the outbreak of African swine fever (ASF).

He said that the retail price of pork shoulder in Luzon should be between P290 and P300 and pork belly or *liempo* at P340 per kilo.

Based on monitoring of the Department of Agriculture (DA) in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of pork shoulder reached as high as P370 and pork *liempo*, P410 per kilo.

"The DA should check this (spike of pork prices in Visayas and Mindanao). It should not be higher compared to Luzon," he said.

At the same time, So assured the public of enough

pork supply, adding that hog farmers were able to repopulate after being affected by ASF.

"After the illegal use of ASF vaccine stopped, the spread of ASF also stopped," So said as he blamed the trial of ASF vaccine in the increase in outbreak of the virus.

He said that pork supply in Metro Manila comes from Bulacan, Pangasinan, Ilocos, Southern Luzon, Rizal and Batangas.

"The good news is many were able to repopulate here in Luzon so we are not too dependent on the supply from Visayas and Mindanao compared to 2020, we are recovering," he said.



Unstable pork supply hits Negros Occidental

BACOLOD CITY: Negros Occidental is experiencing unstable supply of pork and pork products, the president of a hog raisers group in the province said on Thursday, February 29.

Rick Lauron, president of the Alliance of Hog Raisers Association of Negros Occidental (Ahrano), said that about 50 percent of meat shops in the province are affected by the lack of hog supply caused by the spread of African swine fever (ASF).

He added that hog raisers in Negros Occidental are not supplying live hogs and pork products to other areas owing to limited supply.

Asked when the local hog industry could recover, Lauron said "it may take about two months."

On Monday, February 26, Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson signed Executive Order (EO) 24-07 establishing guidelines for "the entry of live pigs, boar semen, pork products, and other pork-related food items from areas with reported cases of ASF into the province."

The EO bans the entry of hogs and pork products from Luzon, Mindanao, Eastern Visayas, Palawan, Guimaras Island, Cebu province including Camotes and Bantayan Islands, Negros Oriental, Bacolod, and countries affected by ASF as may be detected by the Department of Agriculture.

The ban exempts fully cooked processed pork products, such as ham, sausages, hotdogs, canned goods, pork chicharon, and pork-based seasonings, provided they are sourced from meat establishments with a certificate of compliance from the ASF Public-Private Audit.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported that hog production in Negros Occidental decreased by 4.79 percent in 2023 due ASF and hog cholera.

Last year, the province produced only 58,182.10 metric tons (MT) of hogs compared to 61,109.27 MT in 2022.

This brought a reduction of 2.62 percent in the total livestock production of Ne-

gros Occidental, including hog, carabao, cattle and goat, from 76,640.77 MT in 2022 to 74,633.05 MT in 2023, the PSA report showed.

Data also showed that swine inventory in January also declined by 16.21 percent to only 413,217 heads compared to 493,152 heads in January 2023.

In Bacolod City, Councilor Jude Thaddeus Sayson, chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, said that the city government is buying 800 live hogs from Bohol province to address the high cost of pork in the city.

"By importing pigs from other provinces, we expect pork prices to go down by P5 to P10 per kilo," Sayson said.

"Bohol is classified as a green zone as it is free from ASF," he added.

Current prices of pork in Bacolod range from P410 to P430 in local markets.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Bago City, Mayor Nicholas Yulo said that effective Monday, March 4, checkpoints will be set up in its borders with Bacolod City to guard against the entry of pork and pork products as part of efforts to curb the spread of the ASF.

Mayor Yulo said the checkpoints are in compliance with the executive order of the governor.

Yulo said the checkpoints will be located in Barangay Taloc and Tabunan, while the city's border with Bacolod and will be manned by city government personnel on a daily basis.

Yulo added that personnel are mandated to flag down vehicles that have live hogs and pork products in "plain view."

The city government also continuously monitors the public markets in Bago, he said.

He said that Bago can accept pork and its by-products from areas that are free from ASF or those classified as "green areas."

"Technically, the pigs that died in Bago City did not die from ASF. Maybe they died from hog cholera," the mayor said.



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House panel seeks more El Niño aid for farmers

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) should increase its capacity to provide financial assistance to farmers affected by El Niño, House of Representatives agriculture and food chairman and Quezon Rep. Wilfrido Mark M. Enverga said.

According to Mr. Enverga, the P500 million allocated for DA's Survival and Recovery (SURE) Aid program is inadequate to cover all El Niño affected farmers.

The SURE Aid financial support program offers up to P25,000 worth of interest-free loans payable in three years for farmers affected by the dry spells and droughts brought by El Niño.

"I am glad that they have a SURE Aid program of P25,000 per farmer for El Niño-affected individuals," Mr. Enverga told *BusinessWorld* in a Viber message. "My contention was that the total amount available was only P500 million."

"I had appealed to DA to raise the total available amount to ensure that

the program reaches as many affected individuals as possible," he added.

Almost 8,000 farmers have been affected by El Niño, with 6,523 hectares of farmland damaged by dry spells and droughts, Lorna Belinda L. Calda, the DA's Field Operations Service officer-in-charge said in a briefing for the committee last week.

Federation of Free Farmers National Manager Raul Q. Montemayor said that SURE Aid at a budget of P500 million "will benefit only 20,000 out of the more than 2 million rice farmers."

"The production cost of a farmer is around P50,000 per hectare, so if a farmer suffers from a total loss, he will have to find a way to borrow another P25,000 in order to replant," he added.

While the financial support provided by SURE Aid "is well-appreciated," Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura Executive Director Jayson H. Caignlet said the distribution process lacks speed and transparency.

"The bigger concern is the timeliness of the release and a transparent mechanism that will ensure our farmers can easily access this aid and insurance support," Mr. Caignlet said.

He added that the slow release of funds to El Niño-affected farmers means that they cannot immediately replant.

"We hope that the SURE Aid support be disbursed in a timely manner so that affected farmers can replant as soon as possible," he said.

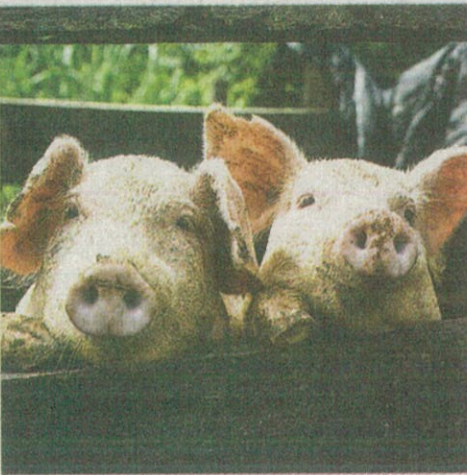
PAGASA (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration), the government weather service, expects El Niño to peak this month.

"The peak of (El Niño) impact is March, April, May, and June," Ana Liza S. Solis, PAGASA Climatology and Agrometeorology Division officer-in-charge said during last week's committee briefing. — **Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio**



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KENNETH SCHIPPER VERA-UNSPLOSH



Hog output to rise 3% this year as vaccine approvals loom

HOG production may increase by 3% this year as farmers continue to grapple with the effects of the African Swine Fever (ASF) outbreak, farmers said.

"Right now we are at 18 to 19 million head, but this is far from pre-ASF. We (will have) a 3% increase this year... even despite problems in the (industry)," National Federation of Hog Farmers, Inc. President Chester Warren Y. Tan said on the sidelines of a hog industry event last week.

Hog production rose 3.3% in 2023, with volumes hitting 1.79 million metric

tons, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Mr. Tan said the hog population was up from 13 million head in 2022.

"We are still positive of an increase in production," he added.

Separately, Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said that an ASF vaccine will likely be approved this year after two suppliers submitted applications to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

"There are vaccines that are on their way to being accredited... I hope if they

are accredited this year, then we can slowly eradicate ASF by next year," Mr. Tiu Laurel told reporters.

He said that a US and Vietnamese supplier are currently seeking approval from the FDA. Other companies from Vietnam and Thailand are also planning to apply.

Until a vaccine is approved, the Department of Agriculture (DA) is prescribing heightened biosecurity measures to slow the spread of ASF.

According to the Bureau of Animal Industry, 12 provinces have active ASF

cases as of Feb. 20, with red zone measures in place.

Towns are classified as red zones if an outbreak is detected in a single barangay, with hog movements restricted. The mobility restrictions ramp up with outbreaks in two or more barangays.

The DA reimburses farmers P5,000 for each culled hog, up to a limit of 20 head.

The first ASF case in the Philippines was detected in 2019. To date, a total of 73 provinces have been hit by ASF since 2019. — **Adrian H. Halili**



Ex-Eastern Samar gov, co-accused walk on fertilizer fund scam raps

BY PETER TABINGO

FORMER Eastern Samar governor Clotilde Salazar and a member of the provincial government's Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) have won their appeal before the Sandiganbayan Sixth Division for the dismissal of two counts of graft charges filed against them and several other local officials in 2018.

The charges involved the alleged misuse of P10 million public funds from the Farm Input and Farm Implements Program (FIFIP) of the Department of Agriculture in 2004.

Salazar, who was elected as the first female governor of the province in 2001, and former BAC member Manuel Japzon were named co-defendants of Rep. Marcelino Libanan and other provincial officials who were accused of giving preference to Akame Marketing which was chosen as the supplier of fertilizers under the DA program through direct contracting.

The Special Panel on Fertilizer Fund Scam said the respondent public officials chose Akame's NBEM-21 microbial inoculant soil activator (NBEM fertilizer) even if it was not registered with the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority (FPA). It added that the supplier also had no license for such trade.

However, the Supreme Court in a resolution dated December 5, 2022, ordered the dismissal of the cases against Libanan and the rest of the other defendants after sustaining their argument that the Ombudsman violated their right to speedy disposition of their cases when it took probers 2013 to 2018 to finish the preliminary investigation.

Salazar and Japzon did not join the petition for review of certiorari before the SC and instead asked the Sandiganbayan to junk their cases, but were overruled in a resolution dated January 3, 2024.

In their Motion for reconsideration dated January 31, 2024, the

two defendants argued that they are similarly situated as the rest of their co-defendants whose rights the SC upheld in its ruling.

They pointed out that while they did not join the petition before the SC, they did not fail to invoke their right as in fact they adopted Libanan's arguments raising the issue of inordinate delay.

Although the Sandiganbayan sustained the prosecution's stand that the motion for reconsideration was filed two days beyond the set deadline, the court said relaxing the rules is warranted.

"There is merit in accused Salazar and Japzon's Motion for Reconsideration, and denying the same outright solely by reason of their counsel's erroneous application of the rules will result in injustice," the court declared.

At the same time, the Sandiganbayan said the SC ruling must likewise apply to both since they were subjects of the same preliminary investigation that the High Court declared was attended by inordinate delay of five years.

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Solon asks PCA to hasten forging of MOAs with local govts

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ.

X@joveemarie

THE Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) must expedite the forging of memorandums of agreement (MOA) with local government units (LGUs) for the agency's replanting project, according to a lawmaker.

Camarines Sur Rep. LRay Villafuerte said the MOAs will "foster collaboration" on planting, replanting, seed farm development and coconut fertilization initiatives that the agency will undertake to revitalize the local coconut sector.

Villafuerte also said he supports the plan of the PCA to plant some 8.5 million seedlings this year alone in support of the government's goal of planting 100 million trees by 2028 as part of the rehabilitation program for this sector.

"LGUs in coconut-producing provinces can perform a vital role in transforming the PCA's ambitious planting and replanting project into a vehicle for reviving this once booming sector as the world's No. 1 exporter

of coconut products," he said.

"The all-out support of LGUs in coconut-producing localities behind the PCA's development and rehabilitation plan is crucial to re-energizing this previously flourishing sector and lifting from poverty our coconut farmers, in step with the President's 'walang maiiwanan' commitment not to leave any Filipino behind in his vision for a peaceful and prosperous nation."

Villafuerte noted that an overwhelming majority of 2.5 million coconut farmers, representing a sizable part of the country's farm population, are already living below the poverty threshold.

"And many more will join them there in the years ahead without any hope of deliverance—unless the Marcos government makes good on its PCA program to reverse in the long term the economic slump hounding this once formidable export sector."

PCA Administrator Bernie Cruz revealed plans to plant 8.5 million coconut seedlings this year under the Massive Coconut

Planting and Replanting Project, addressing the senility of existing coconut trees.

The President had ordered the PCA to craft a rehabilitation plan for the coconut industry, including the planting of 100 million trees by 2028, so the Philippines could become the world's biggest coconut exporter.

The lawmaker said a massive replanting program using hybrid varieties and giving farmers easier access to already available production technologies will easily double per-tree yields, thereby significantly boosting domestic production and increasing the income of local coconut farmers.

As of 2019, about 90 percent of coconut farmers lived below the annual poverty threshold of P125,775; a majority of these tillers listed in the National Coconut Farmers Registry are food insecure and without social protection.

Filipino coconut farmers are getting poorer, because the country's per-tree productivity has been on a downtrend from 46 nuts per tree per year in 2009 to 44 in 2019—as against 80 to 100 nuts in India

and Indonesia.

Villafuerte said coconut productivity is even worse in CamSur, where, because of the large number of old or senile trees there, the current annual yield average is a lower 34 nuts per tree.

Even without replacing the standing trees, he said giving farmers access to already existing technologies to raise output and to inputs like fertilizer will already improve their yields, given that the Philippines's yield average of 44 nuts per tree represents just 50 percent of the potential yield of the native tall variety and 30 percent of local hybrid varieties.

Citing data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), Villafuerte said the country's coconut production fell to an average of 14 million metric tons (MMT) in the past three years from 15.86 MMT in 2012. This allowed Indonesia and India to overtake the Philippines, which used to be known as the world's top coconut producer.

Despite falling harvests, he said the Philippines still managed to export \$3.22 billion worth of coconut products in 2022.



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Urban gardening palakasin sa mga tahanan

Nilarga ng Department of Agriculture (DA) sa Calabarzon o Region 4A ang kampanya nito para isulong ang urban gardening upang makatulong sa kakulangan ng pagkain at malnutrisyon.

Nauna nang nag-sagawa ang mga agriculturist ng DA ng urban gardening demonstrations sa mga magsasaka at kinatawan ng mga lokal na pamahalaan mula sa San Pablo, Calamba, at San Pedro sa Laguna, gayundin sa Lipa at Santo Tomas sa Batangas.

Ayon kay Maricris Ite, regional focal person ng National Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Program (NUPAP), kanilang hinihikayat ang mga nakatira sa siyudad na magtanim ng mga prutas at gulay sa bakuran nila o saan mang lugar na

mayroong espasyo at maaaring pagtaniman.

Sinasamantala ng DA at mga lokal na pamahalaan na interesadong muli ngayon ang mga tao sa pagkakaroon ng hardin sa kanilang tahanan upang hikayatin ang mga ito na magtanim ng mga halamang makakain.

"This not only enhances local food production but also contributes to improved nutrition, community engagement, and sustainable urban development," sabi ni Ite sa panayam ng PNA nitong Sabado.

Layon ng isinusulong na urban farming ng DA na magkaroon ng kaalaman ang mga mamamayan sa entrepreneurship, alternative livelihood at healthy lifestyle sa pamamagitan ng mga masustansiyang pagkain.



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Higit P357-M pinsala ng El Niño sa agrikultura - DA

Umabot na sa higit P357.4 million ang halaga ng pinsala sa sektor ng agrikultura sa iba't ibang rehiyon sa bansa dulot ng El Niño phenomenon.

Ito naman ang nabatid mula kay Agriculture Assistant Secretary at Spokesperson Arnel De Mesa kung saan pinakamalaking danyos ito na naitala sa Western Visayas partikular sa Iloilo na aabot sa P127 milyon na sinundan ng Oriental Mindoro na may P56 milyon.

Tinatayang nasa 6,600 ektarya ng mga pananim ang nasira. Nasa 1,100 ektarya dito ay totally damage habang 5,400 ektarya ang partially damage at may tiyansa pang makarekober.

Sinabi pa ni De Mesa na maliit na porsiyento lang ng pananim na palay ang naapektuhan ng tagtuyot.

Kung ikukumpara aniya ang epekto ng strong El Niño ngayong taon sa mga nagdaang tagtuyot partikular noong 1997, hindi naman ito lubhang malala.

Bagama't papatindi pa ang tagtuyot, pinaghandaan na rin ng DA ang pagpasok ng La Niña sa 2nd quarter ng taon. (Doris Franche-Borja)



KARTADA

Solon inisnab ng NFA sa bigas

SINO raw itong mambabatas ang inisnab ng National Food Authority (NFA) dahil hindi siya pinagbentahan ng bigas?

Ayon sa nakalap ni Mang Teban, nadismaya raw ang mambabatas dahil inismol ang kanyang werpa at posisyon matapos hindi bigyan ng bigas.

Gagamitin daw sana ng mambabatas ang sako-sa-kong bigas para ipamahagi sa mga mahihirap na pamilya. In short, magpapalapad ng papel sa mga botante.

Kahit sa susunod na taon pa ang eleksiyon, aligaga ang lady solon sa pagbibigay ng ayuda lalo na sa mga binaha at nasapol ng landslide sa Mindanao noong nakaraang buwan.

Ang akala ng NFA, gustong magpalibre ng bigas ang mambabatas kaya hindi nila ito binigyan.

Nilinaw pa ng lady solon na handa naman siyang magbayad sa kukuning bigas dahil hindi raw niya ugali na magpalibre.

Hindi na nakapatataka kung isang araw ay haharap sa imbestigasyon ang NFA matapos tablahin ang request ng isang mambabatas sa hinihinging bigas.

Pintahan n'yo na. Ang mambabatas na tinabla sa hinihinging bigas ay mahilig sa makukulay na damit.



DA: El Niño-hit farmers to get credit, insurance

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said Saturday that the national government will provide credit and insurance assistance to farmers and fishers affected by the El Niño phenomenon.

DA spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said at least P500 million credit assistance will be provided to farmers and fishers for them to cope with the dry spell caused by the phenomenon.

About P1.8 billion in insurance claims will also be distributed to the affected farmers and fishers, de Mesa added.

At least P25,000 credit assistance will be given to each affected farmer and fisher and a maximum of P20,000 insurance



claims may be granted as well.

"Ang gobyerno natin ay naglaan na ng P500 million na credit assistance. This is

P25,000 per affected farmer and fisher and then 'yung ating insurance claims about P1.8 billion maximum of P20,000 (each)

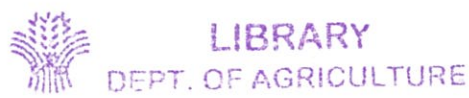
ang pwedeng ipamahagi," he said.

Also, De Mesa said the DA is readying the distribution of P5,000 financial assistance to rice farmers and P3,000 fuel subsidy to both farmers and fishers provided under the national budget.

"Pinabilis din namin iyong pagbibigay ng P5,000 doon sa rice farmers financial assistance plus iyong P3,000 na fuel subsidy na nasa general appropriations," he added.

As of Feb. 25, damage to agriculture was estimated at P357.4 million, hitting mostly farms in the Mimaropa, Western Visayas, and Zamboanga Peninsula Regions.

The phenomenon has affected 7,668 farmers so far. PNA



**CL farmers receive
P500 increased subsidy**

By Steve Gosuico

CABANATUAN CITY—Farmer-leaders of irrigator groups from Nueva Ecija and Aurora hailed the **National Irrigation Administration-Regional Office 3 in Central Luzon** for the increased subsidy given to them in the operation of irrigation systems from P150 to P500 per hectare in every cropping season.

"Salamat at patuloy na nabibiyayaan ang mga magsasaka tulad po ng dagdag sa IMT, ito po ay malaking tulong po sa aming pangangailangan. Nagpapasalamat po ang pederasyon ng Nueva Ecija sa mga taga-NIA sa patuloy n'yo pong pagtangkilik at pagbibigay ng mga proyekto sa amin," said Federation president Gregorio T. Alcantara during the turnover of completed projects and contract-signing activities under the Aurora-Nueva Ecija Irrigation Management Office of the NIA-Region III-Central Luzon held

at the Division 3 Events Center inside the UPRIIS compound on Friday.

NIA-OIC Deputy Administrator for Engineering and Operations and concurrent NIA-Region III head Engr. Josephine B. Salazar led the activity that was also graced by farmer-leaders of 19 irrigator associations and representatives from partner agencies such as the Department of Agriculture-Regional Field Office 3, the National Food Authority (NFA), and the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice).

The completed projects for 2022 included the Bibiclat CIP, Cabileo CIP, Paitan CIP, Simim-baan SWIP, Agupalo Este CIP, Canaan East Capiungan PIP, Casilagan SWIP, Lusok CIP, Danasa CIP, Salwit SWIP, San Antonio CIP, Popolon CIP, Betania CIP, Binumbunan CIP, Cordero CIS while for 2023, these were the Sagaba CIS, San Agustin CIS, Ted Ted Ti Ling-It CIS, and Bulalakay CIS.



CRY FOR HELP. An El Niño-affected farm in the Ilocos region. The Department of Agriculture has committed to sending irrigation equipment to farmers in Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro after municipal authorities reached out to the national government amid the extreme drought brought by El Niño. (PNA file photo)

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DA aids El Niño-hit town in Oriental Mindoro

CALAPAN CITY, Oriental Mindoro—The Department of Agriculture (DA) quickly committed to sending irrigation equipment to farmers in Bulalacao town in Oriental Mindoro province after municipal authorities reached out to the national government amid the ongoing dry spell brought about by El Niño.

This came after the municipal Board placed the southernmost town of Bulalacao under a state of calamity due to "severe and prolonged drought."

DA Undersecretaries Jerome Oliveros and Arnel de Mesa have just visited the town to assess the impact of the dry spell, the Bulalacao Information Office (BIO) disclosed in an exchange of emails with the Philippine News Agency on Friday.

It was also disclosed that during their inspection visit, the two DA officials met with about 50 farmer leaders to get a better sense of the severity of the situation on the ground.

At the same time, Mayor Ernilo Villas and municipal ag-

riculture officer Rommel de Guzman successfully appealed to the DA officials for logistical support for the town's agricultural sector.

Oliveros has pledged to send Solar-Powered Water System Irrigation equipment to barangays Cambunang, Majao, and Nasucob, with a reported combined value of P19 million, according to the BIO.

Additionally, the DA will also send approximately P40

million worth of cold storage equipment to Bulalacao to preserve its harvest of onions, among other crops.

In Bulalacao, there are about 500 hectares of land planted with onions by 575 farmers, 539 hectares planted with rice by 545 farmers, and 20.2 hectares planted with other products by 28 farmers, according to the BIO.

"Farmers dig water sources for supply but the drought has already been affecting the quality and quantity of their products like palay and onions," it stated.

Meanwhile, national agencies and government financial institutions (GFI) have also responded to help cushion El Niño's impact on the town's agricultural sector.

Moreover, the DA will distribute seedlings, fertilizer, and even livestock to affected farmers under its Quick Response After Recovery Program, the BIO further said. (PNA)



Villar: Local hog raisers can meet pork demand

By Macon Ramos-Araneta

SENATOR Cynthia Villar is confident that local hog producers' link and network with institutional markets such as restaurants and hotels will lessen their dependence on imported pork.

While recognizing the Filipinos' love for pork, Villar said it is imperative

for domestic hog producers to provide consumers with good quality pork.

"The love for pork of our kababayans will remain so we need to find a good source of juicy, tender pork with the ideal meat-to-fat ratio at affordable price," Villar said in her speech at the National Federation of Hog Farmers National Pig Day Celebration in Qu-

ezon City from March 1 up to 5.

The event was believed to have set a Guinness Record for the most number of pork dishes on display and to be served.

Villar, chairperson of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, related that Filipinos consumed 15 kilos of pork, 11.6 kgs. of chicken and three kgs. of beef a year.

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'DRY SPELL,' 'DRY CONDITION' AFFECT OTHER VISAYAS AREAS

DRUGHT GRIPPING NEGROS OCCIDENTAL, SAYS PAGASA

By Carla P. Gómez
@carlagomezINQ

BACOLOD CITY—Negros Occidental has been officially categorized as having been affected by drought, the only province in the Visayas that has been so far placed in that category as the absence of rainfall spawned by the El Niño weather phenomenon continues to be felt in many parts of the country.

The province is currently experiencing the drought or three consecutive months of way below normal rainfall condition or more than 60-percent reduction from the average, according to the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) Visayas report dated Feb. 29.

On the other hand, provinces that are considered to be under a "dry spell" are Antique, Iloilo, Capiz and Guimaras in Western Visayas; Cebu and Negros Oriental in Central Visayas; and Leyte, Biliran and Eastern Samar in Eastern Visayas.

A dry spell is defined as three consecutive months of below normal rainfall conditions.

P55-M damage

Classified to be under a "dry condition" are the provinces of Bohol and Siquijor in Central Visayas and Southern Leyte in Eastern Visayas for having experienced two consecutive months of below normal rainfall condition, the Pagasa said.

In Negros Occidental, the damage due to rice and corn

crops attributed to the El Niño phenomenon now stood at P55,412,924, with Kabankalan City as the hardest hit, acting provincial agriculturist Dina Genzola said.

She said the damage has affected 1,213 farmers tilling crops on 1,064 hectares, with rice crops valued at P55,255,071.89 lost to the drought, and corn at P157,852.80.

Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson earlier said the provincial government was considering cloud seeding to induce rains over affected agricultural lands.

The weather bureau said a drought could adversely affect different climate-sensitive sectors, including water resources, agriculture, energy, health and public safety.

However, Bago City and its neighboring areas appeared to have been spared from the effects of El Niño.

There are 12,000 hectares or rice crops under the Bago River Irrigation System (BRIS) that are doing well and producing six tons or rice per hectare.

(BRIS) covers the cities of Bago, La Carlota and Bacolod and the towns of Murcia, Pulupandan, San Enrique and Valadolid.

On March 1, farmers in Bago cleared the main canal of BRIS to ensure adequate water supply for their fields, provincial administrator Rayfrando Diaz said.

According to Diaz, only the rainfed rice lands are affected and farmers there were warned not to plant during the drought. **INQ**



CANAL CLEARING Farmers clear the irrigation system in Bago City, Negros Occidental, on March 1 to ensure adequate water supply for their crops amid the drought. —CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



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More irrigation infra being built to address El Niño

By **ROEL PAREÑO**

SUMISIP, Basilan – More irrigation infrastructure and dams are being built to address the effects of El Niño nationwide, according to President Marcos.

Various approaches to address El Niño are needed since parts of Luzon and Visayas, especially Western Visayas, are drying up while Mindanao

is experiencing floods, he noted.

"Mindanao has a different effect of the El Niño," Marcos said at the Kasanyangan Monument in Sampinit Complex in Basilan on Saturday.

In an advisory last month, the state weather bureau reported that 24 provinces in Luzon and a province in Visayas will potentially experience drought conditions; 17

provinces, dry spell; 10 provinces, dry conditions.

Areas that could experience drought include Abra, Apayao, Bataan, Benguet, Cagayan, Cavite, Ifugao, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Isabela, Kalinga, La Union, Metropolitan Manila, Mountain Province, Nueva Ecija, Nueva Vizcaya, Occidental Mindoro, Palawan, Pangasinan, Quirino, Rizal, Zambales; Negros

Occidental in Visayas and none in Mindanao.

Areas that could experience dry spells are Batangas, Laguna, Masbate, Oriental Mindoro in Luzon; Antique, Biliran, Capiz, Cebu, Eastern Samar, Guimaras, Iloilo, Leyte, Negros Oriental, Samar in Visayas; and Lanao del Norte, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in Mindanao.

Dry conditions could be experi-

enced in Bulacan in Luzon; Bohol, Siquijor and Southern Leyte in Visayas; and Camiguin, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga Sibugay in Mindanao.

Marcos noted that the infrastructure will also support the government's food security program and food supply.



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SPECIAL REPORT:

Rice fund raises stakes for farmers

(First of three parts)

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

Five years ago, lawmakers and government officials made a promise of a lifetime: the country's rice farmers would be competitive at long last.

That promise was embodied in four letters: RCEF, short for Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund.

The fund was created by the landmark Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law, which took effect on March 5, 2019 and which liberalized the country's rice trade regime.

To help Filipino rice farmers compete against the free entry of imported rice, RCEF was born.

The six-year fund – set to end this year – had one goal: make farmers competitive. How? Through the provision of at least P10 billion worth of support in the form of seeds, machines, credit and extension work.

Fast forward to today, lawmakers and government officials are making another promise: extend the life of the fund to make the farmers competitive – at long last?

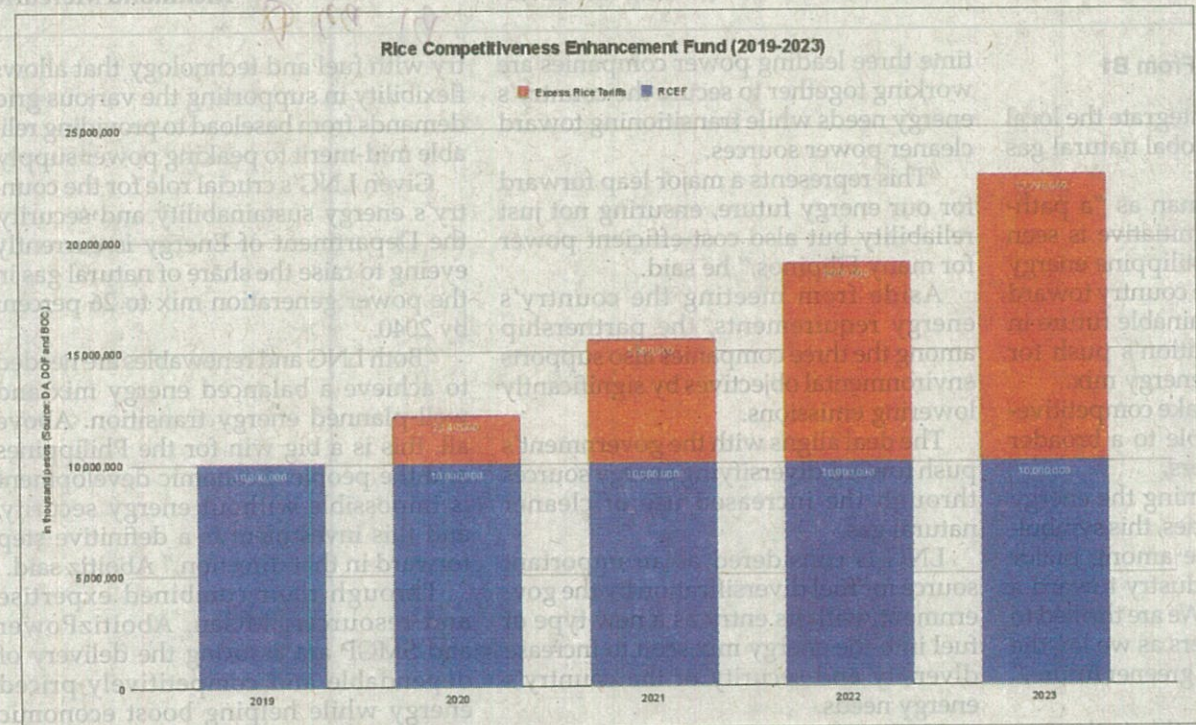
Pushing for extension

A week before RA 11203 turned five last Feb. 14, Sen. Cynthia Villar, the principal author of the law, made a momentous remark.

"I am sponsoring the Rice Tariffication Law extension bill," Villar told the staff of the Philippine Rice Research Institute in Nueva Ecija, the country's rice granary.

Villar said extending RCEF is necessary to reach the government's goal of a national average palay yield of six metric tons per hectare. She said the current average yield remains below five MT per hectare.

RCEF was envisioned to raise farmers' income by 30 percent by improving their yield, slashing production costs and reducing post-harvest losses. **Turn to B3**





SPECIAL REPORT From B1

"You have to renew (RCEF) for another five years because we have not yet achieved what we wanted to achieve," Villar said in a separate interview with reporters recently.

The goal is also to bring down production cost of palay to P6 per kilogram, which she noted remains far from reality, she said.

Nonetheless, Villar lauded the improvements that the RCEF, particularly its seed component, has contributed to local palay productivity.

The latest average yield figures of RCEF seed beneficiaries have reached 4.36 metric tons per hectare as of dry season 2023, from benchmark 3.63 metric tons in 2019, according to the Philippine Rice Research Institute.

Villar said she has already asked the implementing agencies of the RCEF components to prepare their reports, particularly achievements, to justify the extension of the program.

Obligation versus actual disbursement

Government documents obtained by **The STAR** showed that implementing agencies of the RCEF have obligated 95.33 percent or about P47.667 billion out of its P50 billion total fund in the past five years at the end of 2023.

However, the disbursement rate has been quite lackluster at just 74 percent or P35.259 billion.

All four RCEF components – seeds, machines, credit and extension work – posted an above 95 percent obligation rate but it is in the disbursement when things get different.

Only two components recorded a disbursement rate higher than 90 percent: seeds at 93.08 percent and credit at 98.09 percent.

The extension component had an 82 percent disbursement rate while the mechanization was the laggard at just 55.98 percent.

Achievements so far

Despite the low disbursement rate, the mechanization component reached a 91.03 percent accomplishment rate in terms of its achievement at the end of last year.

This translated to 25,519 mechanization technologies delivered out of the 27,910 technologies procured in the past five years.

The technologies included hand tractors, four-wheel tractors, seeders, transplanters, combine harvesters, reapers, dryers and rice mills.

The RCEF seed component, meanwhile, has distributed 15.11 million 20-kilogram bags of inbred rice seeds to 6.084 million beneficiaries. The component achieved a 92 percent accomplishment rate out of its target of 16.352 million bags.

The distributed inbred rice seeds have

been planted to nearly seven million hectares of land since 2019.

For the extension component, the government achieved 94 percent of its target number of trainings or about 10,651 out of the targeted 11,329 batches. About 251,971 benefited from the RCEF training.

The government has extended P4.625 billion in combined loans to 14,862 individuals and 309 farmers cooperatives and associations (FCAs) under the credit assistance component of RCEF. Broken down, P3.302 billion went to FCAs while P1.322 billion were lent to individuals.

Of the total loans granted during the five-year period, P2.15 billion were from the Development Bank of the Philippines while P2.448 billion came from the Land Bank of the Philippines.

Yearning for legislation

At present, there are two bills filed at the House of the Representatives that seek to extend the RCEF program.

First is House Bill (HB) 212 filed by father-daughter lawmakers Sultan Kudarat Rep. Horacio Suansing Jr. and Nueva Ecija Rep. Mikaela Angela Suansing last 2022.

The bill seeks to institutionalize the RCEF program and allocate all rice tariff collections into it in perpetuity.

The bill also wants to hike the RCEF by P5 billion to P15 billion, to be allocated for the provision of fertilizer and other chemical inputs.

Meanwhile, the bill proposes to reduce the fund for the credit assistance program by P500 million due to its underperformance. The amount would then be transferred to the mechanization component, making it P5.5 billion.

The bill noted that its proposed amendments were based on the master's thesis of the younger Suansing, who earned her degree from Harvard University, that focused on improving the RCEF implementation.

The second bill – HB 9547 – filed by Rosanna Vergara, another Nueva Ecija representative, last Nov. 2023 seeks to extend RCEF by another six years.

There is currently no counterpart bill filed at the Senate for the extension of RCEF.

Agriculture experts and stakeholders interviewed by **The STAR** reached a consensus:

RCEF must continue and it must change to realize its goal of making Filipino farmers competitive.

And topping the list of changes they proposed? Revisit RCEF's "rigid" allocation.

(To be continued)

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Sen. Cynthia Villar: Gov't should lessen dependence on imported pork

By HANNAH TORREGOZA

Senator Cynthia A. Villar said she is confident that the link and network established

by the country's hog producers with institutional markets such as restaurants and hotels will lessen their dependence on imported pork. ►8

Sen. Cynthia Villar: Gov't should lessen dependence on imported pork 1◀

While recognizing the Filipinos' love for pork, Villar said it is imperative for the country's hog producers to provide consumers with good quality pork.

"The love for pork of our kababayans will remain so we need to find a good source of juicy, tender pork with the ideal meat-to-fat ratio at affordable price," Villar said in her speech during the National Federation of Hog Farmers National Pig Day Celebration in Quezon City held from March 1 up to 5.

"We Pinoys love to eat meat, particularly pork meat. We offer a variety of pork dishes. Some of the favorite pork dishes are - Lechon, Barbecue, Adobo, Pochero, Sinigang na Baboy, Tokwa at Baboy, Dinuguan, Binagoongan, Kadios Baboy Langka or KBL, Pork Sisig, Bagnet, Pork Bistek, and Crispy Pata, among others," she pointed out.

Villar, chairperson of the Senate

Committee on Agriculture, pointed out that based on studies, Filipinos consume 15 kilograms of pork, 11.6 kilograms of chicken, and 3 kilograms of beef a year.

The senator noted that based on a Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) study, the top five regions with the highest volume of hog production at live weight are Calabarzon (Cavite-Laguna-Batangas-Rizal-Quezon), Central Luzon, Northern Mindanao, Central Visayas, Davao Region, and Zamboanga Peninsula, as of September 2023.

"And about 67.5 percent of the country's swine population came from small hold farms, while the remaining 29.2 percent and 3.3 percent were from commercial and semi-commercial farms, respectively," she stressed.

The senator lamented however, that the Philippines is not spared from the risks of the African Swine Flu (ASF) which is one of the

challenges facing the hog industry. The hog sector has registered P200-billion in losses since ASF cases were recorded in 2019.

In November 2023, the Bureau of Animal Industry said that only 11 provinces out of the 82 remain ASF-free. These are Batanes, Occidental Mindoro, Palawan, Bohol, Siquijor, Biliran, Bukidnon, Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

While no ASF vaccine has been approved, Villar said she is confident Filipinos "can only rely on our good animal husbandry practices in preventing disease and disease-causing agents to spread for our hog farmers to earn, attain their maximum farm yield, protect the consumer food supply by making available clean and safe hogs for slaughter."

At the same time, Villar said the government should also stop agricultural smuggling to protect local hog producers.



Inflation seen picking up to 3.0%

BY NIÑA MYKA PAULINE ARCEO

INFLATION is expected to have risen last month due to higher food prices but likely stayed within target, a *Manila Times* poll found.

The median forecast in the survey was 3.0 percent, higher than 2.8 percent recorded in January but still within the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas' (BSP) 2.0- to 4.0-percent goal.

The central bank also expects inflation to have risen on Thursday saying that it could have hit 2.8-3.8 percent last month.

Official February inflation data will be released on Tuesday, March 5.

Not all of those surveyed by the *Times* expect higher inflation, the exception being Pantheon Macroeconomics chief economist Miguel Chanco who forecast a dip to 2.7 percent, mainly due to a fall in housing and utilities price growth.

"This should be offset partly by transport deflation coming to an end," he added.

"Overall, our core view still is that average inflation should remain well within the BSP's target range this year, at 2.8 percent."

Philippine National Bank economist Alvin Arogo, meanwhile, said inflation likely stayed at 2.8 percent last month.

Upward pressures would have primarily stemmed from rice and the reverse from vegetables and tubers, he added.

ING Manila Bank senior economist Nicholas Antonio Mapa expects inflation to have picked up to 2.9 percent, noting a likely 25-percent increase in rice prices and potential

► **Seen B2**

■ **SEEN FROM B1**

Inflation

pressures from rising diesel and kerosene prices and the impact of El Niño on the cost of fruits.

"Barring any supply side shocks, we believe inflation will settle within the BSP's inflation target," he said.

"Even the BSP's own 'worst case scenario' risk-adjusted inflation forecast, which includes all the risks in their scenarios, points to inflation slipping below target while the baseline inflation forecast also points to that scenario," he noted.

For their part, Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. chief economist Michael Ricafort, HSBC Global

Research economist Aris Dacanay, and Bank of the Philippine Islands senior economist Emilio Neri all forecast a 3.0-percent result for February.

Ricafort attributed this to higher global crude oil prices and cautioned of further monthly inflation gains given base effects.

Neri said that petroleum, meat, and rice prices would have driven February inflation, but added that average inflation would finally return to target this year.

Dacanay also cited base effects, which "will likely remain in place until July of this year and can potentially push inflation to breach the central bank's 2 to 4 percent target band sometime in Q2 (second quarter) 2024."

He added that while global rice prices eased slightly by the end

The Manila Times®

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February, the impact on domestic prices would take time to manifest.

Sun Life Investment Management and Trust Corp. economist Patrick Ella and Union Bank of the Philippines chief economist Ruben Carlo Asuncion, meanwhile, forecast February inflation of 3.1 percent.

This would have been due to higher food prices, Ella said, while Asuncion attributed his forecast to base effects.

Given the expected impact of El Niño, Asuncion said inflation could peak at 5.0 percent in June and July before gradually decreasing to 3.5 percent in September.

"On this note, we believe the BSP's decision to cut its policy rate later in the year would hinge largely on the outlook for core inflation," he added.

Security Bank Corp. chief economist Robert Dan Rocas expects higher inflation of 3.2 percent, driven by persistent price hikes in essential food items such as rice, meat, and fish, along with escalating petroleum and electricity costs.

Still, he said that there might be some offsetting factors from lower prices of vegetables, fruits and sugar.

Chinabank Research, meanwhile, said inflation could have hit 3.3 percent due to higher rice, meat, and fish prices as well as increases in fuel and cooking gas costs.

It noted that higher Manila Electric Co. (Meralco) rates and power rate hikes in certain Visayas and Mindanao areas would have counteracted price drops for veg-

etables, fruits and sugar.

"Looking ahead, we anticipate inflation will breach the BSP's 2 to 4 percent target again from April to July due to base effects," Chinabank Research added.

"However, average headline inflation will likely settle within target this year."

Emmanuel Lopez from the Colegio de San Juan de Letran Graduate School had the highest forecast of 3.8 percent, which he attributed to rising oil prices and the worsening impact of El Niño.

Still, relatively stable prices could prompt monetary authorities to cut key interest rates, and average inflation will likely fall within target at 2.9 percent this year.

"The stability of prices in the past months will likely bring

down the policy rate in the next policy meeting come April," Lopez claimed.

The BSP's benchmark rate currently stands at 6.5 percent, the highest since 2007, following 450 basis points of rate hikes beginning May 2022 as inflation started surging.

The policymaking Monetary Board has held fire during its last three meetings and will next meet on April 4.

It will not have the benefit of inflation data for March, which will be released on April 5.

Last week, the BSP said that it would "continue to monitor developments affecting the outlook for inflation and growth in line with its data-dependent approach to monetary policy decision-making."

Inflation uptick seen in Feb. — poll

By Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson
Reporter

HEADLINE INFLATION likely quickened in February amid higher prices of key commodities like food, electricity and fuel, analysts said.

A *BusinessWorld* poll of 16 analysts yielded a median estimate of 3% for the consumer price index (CPI) in February. This is within the 2.8-3.6% forecast of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) for the month.

If realized, February inflation would be slightly faster than the

2.8% print in January but much slower than 8.6% in the same month a year ago.

It would also mark the first time that inflation picked up on a month-on-month basis since September 2023.

February would also mark the third straight month that inflation

was within the BSP's 2-4% target range.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) is set to release February inflation data on Tuesday (March 5).

"We look for headline inflation to accelerate a touch to 3% year on year in February from 2.8% in January," Sarah Tan, an economist

from Moody's Analytics, said in an e-mail.

"Key factors driving upward price pressures include higher prices of key agricultural goods such as rice and meat produce, an increase in electricity rates as well as higher petroleum prices," she added.

Inflation, S1/3

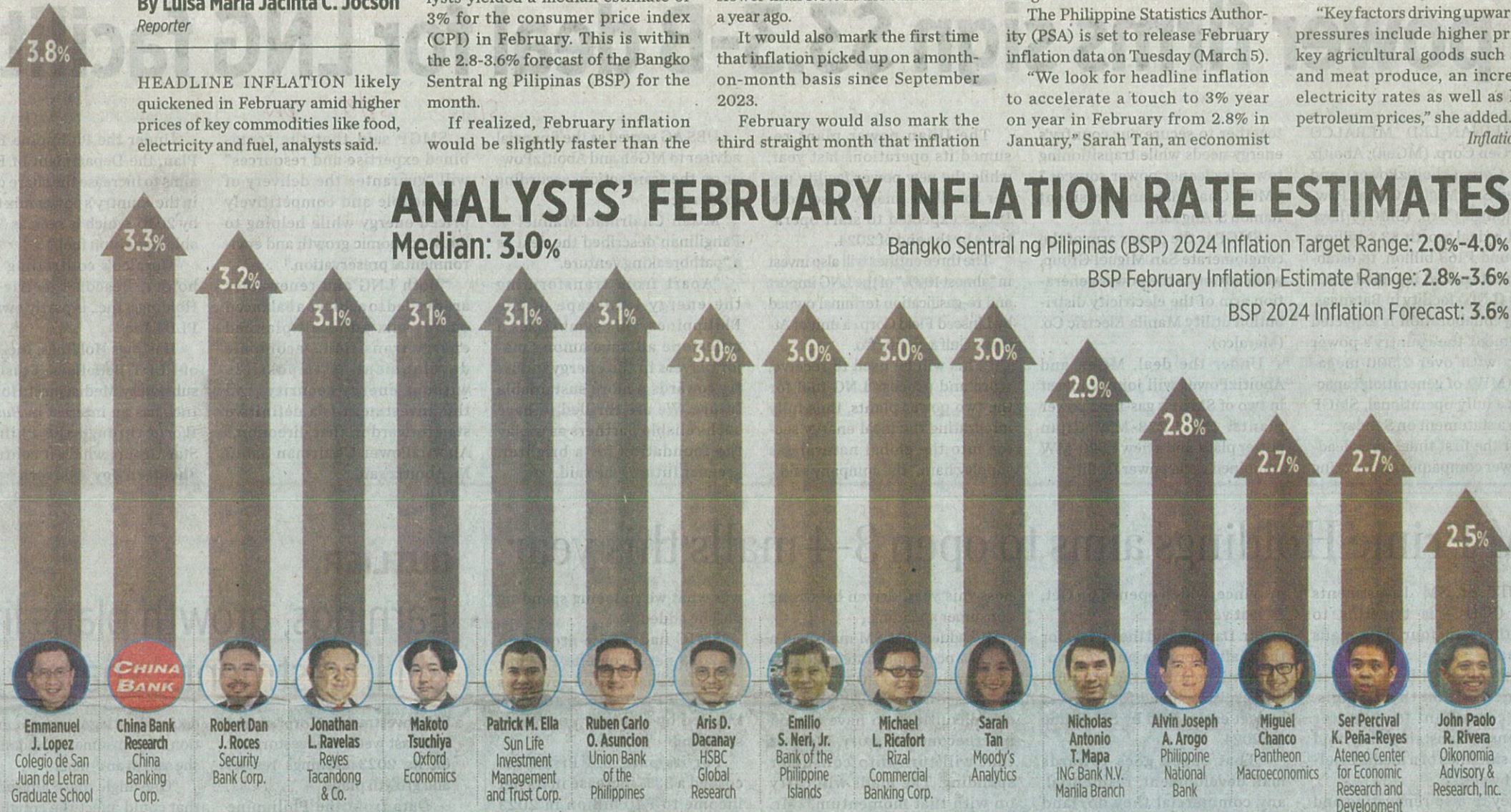
ANALYSTS' FEBRUARY INFLATION RATE ESTIMATES

Median: 3.0%

Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) 2024 Inflation Target Range: 2.0%-4.0%

BSP February Inflation Estimate Range: 2.8%-3.6%

BSP 2024 Inflation Forecast: 3.6%





Inflation, from SI/1

Data from the Agriculture department showed that as of Feb. 29, the price of a kilogram of local well-milled rice ranged from P48 to P55 from P37 to P45 in the same period a year ago. Regular-milled rice rose to P50 per kilogram from P32 to P40.

ING Bank N.V. Manila Senior Economist Nicholas Antonio T. Mapa said that rice continued to be a main driver of inflation.

"High domestic rice prices and a hike in electricity rates also fanned inflationary pressures during the month. Global rice prices slightly eased by the end of February but its impact on domestic prices will likely take some time before taking effect," HSBC economist for ASEAN Aris Dacanay said in an e-mail.

China Bank Research also noted electricity rates rose in areas serviced by Manila Electric Co. (Meralco), as well as parts of Visayas and Mindanao, during the month.

The overall rate for a typical household rose by P0.5738 to P11.9168 per kilowatt-hour (kWh) in February from P11.3430 in the previous month, Meralco said. This was due to an increase in the generation charge, which accounts for almost 80% of a consumer's monthly electricity bill.

"Also, the Department of Energy reported an increase in crude oil prices due to supply-side constraints coming from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries output caps and lingering conflicts along the Red Sea," Ms. Tan added.

In February alone, pump price adjustments stood at a net increase of P1.05 a liter for gasoline, P1.55 a liter for diesel and P0.35 a liter for kerosene.

Meanwhile, analysts said that fading base effects have also contributed to the potential uptick in inflation.

"Inflation for February could pick up to 3% year on year mathematically due to some easing of the high base effects," Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. Chief Economist Michael L. Ricafort said in an e-mail.

Mr. Dacanay also noted the "unfavorable" base effects due to the peak in inflation in January 2023, which stood at a 14-year high of 8.7%.

"Without any sudden change in policy or external conditions, these unfavorable base effects will likely remain in place until July of this year and can potentially push inflation to breach the central bank's 2-4% target band sometime in the second quarter," he added.

RISKS TO OUTLOOK

In the coming months, analysts said inflation may spike in the middle of the year.

"Looking ahead, we anticipate inflation will breach the BSP's 2-4% target again from April to July due to base effects.

However, average headline inflation will likely settle within target this year," China Bank Research said.

Philippine National Bank economist Alvin Joseph A. Arogo flagged risks to the inflation outlook, such as the El Niño weather event.

"Our baseline estimates assume that amid the wearing-off of base effects, there will be a transitory spike in prices because of the threats from El Niño, possible Middle East conflict escalation, and lagged impact of minimum wage hikes," he said in an e-mail.

The latest bulletin from the state weather bureau showed that the El Niño will likely persist until May.

Earlier estimates by the central bank showed that the dry weather pattern could impact inflation by 0.02 percentage point.

"We expect some volatility in the inflation readings over the next few months given the El Niño weather pattern could strengthen and keep food prices elevated," Moody's Analytics Ms. Tan said.

"We understand that we are now experiencing El Niño, however, we note that other crops appear to have prices either falling or more behaved. If authorities can find a way to lower the cost of rice, we could see inflation well under control," Mr. Mapa added.

Fading base effects and the El Niño could cause inflation to peak at 5% in the June-July period before easing to 3.5% in September, Union Bank of the Philippines, Inc. Chief Economist Ruben Carlo O. Asuncion said.

POLICY CUT

Despite the potential uptick in inflation, analysts expect the BSP to keep rates steady until it begins policy easing in the middle of the year.

Sun Life Investment Management and Trust Corp. economist Patrick M. Ella said he expects the BSP to cut rates starting June.

"Should February's inflation print settle within the BSP's target range of 2% to 4%, this will give the BSP confidence to keep its policy rate steady when they next meet on April 4," Ms. Tan said.

The BSP kept its benchmark rate steady at 6.5% at its February meeting. The central bank raised borrowing costs by 450 basis points (bps) from May 2022 to October 2023.

"Our base case at the moment is that the Monetary Board will start normalizing (cutting) rates in May, by 25 bps, with 2024 likely to see a total of 100 bps in reductions," Pantheon Chief Emerging Asia Economist Miguel Chanco said.

ING's Mr. Mapa also said the BSP will remain on hold as long as the US Federal Reserve keeps rates unchanged.



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Well-milled rice prices average P50.63

THE national average retail price of well-milled rice in mid-February was P50.63 per kilogram (kg), the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said in a report.

The average price was up from the P50.34 recorded between Feb. 1 and 5, which the PSA refers to as the first phase of the month.

The highest retail price in the second phase was reported in the Central Visayas, with the average at P59.27 per kg during the period.

Ilocos Region posted the lowest price for well-milled rice at P52.76 per kg.

The PSA reported that regular-milled rice averaged P50.63 per kg in the second phase of the month, up 0.6% compared to the first phase.

The highest price for regular-milled rice was recorded in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao with an average of P54.17 per kg.

At the low end was the Western Visayas, where regular-milled rice averaged P46.09 per kg.

Brown sugar averaged P76.52 per kg, a 0.6% decline from the previous period.

The PSA reported that brown sugar prices were highest in Calabarzon at P88.10 per kg during the second phase of February.

The lowest average price was reported in the Zamboanga Peninsula at P67.58 per kg.

The PSA reported that the national average retail price for refined sugar was P87.49 per kg.

For the second phase of Feb., prices in Calabarzon were the highest with sugar at an average of P97.06 per kg.

Prices for refined sugar were also lowest in Zamboanga Peninsula with P78.85 per kg. — **Adrian H. Halili**

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Cracked earth. A portion of a rice field in Bulacan has started to dry because of the El Niño phenomenon which has so far caused over P940 million in damage to the agriculture sector. Government is promising assistance to farmers and fisherfolk affected by the dry spell.

PHOTO BY ROLLY SALVADOR

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PHL hails WTO role in seeking more convergence despite agri impasse

By ANDREA E. SAN JUAN
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AFTER five days of negotiations at the 13th Ministerial Conference, Manila underscored the importance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) despite unresolved issues in areas such as agriculture, dispute settlement reform and fisheries subsidies.

"Given the different levels of development of the now 166 WTO Members, finding convergence on sensitive and important issues is expected to be challenging," Trade and Industry Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual was quoted in a statement the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) issued last Sunday.

While there remains a lot of work to be done in agriculture, dispute settlement reform and fisheries subsidies, the Philippines's trade chief said the Ministerial Conference was

still able to deliver on key outcomes such as the extension of moratorium on the imposition of customs duties on electronic transmission, finalization of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement, the entry into force of Service Domestic Regulations Agreement and the accession of Timor Leste and Comoros as new WTO members.

Pascual also recognized the "good progress" in the negotiation of fisheries subsidies. The Philippines was the 70th Member to deposit its instrument of acceptance of the WTO agreement on fisheries subsidies, an accord meant to safeguard the world's depleting fish stocks and curb harmful subsidies.

For such Agreement to enter into force, two-thirds of 110 of WTO members must formally accept the Protocol of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies by depositing an "instrument of acceptance" with the

intergovernmental organization.

Despite the conference concluding with unresolved issues, Pascual said, the WTO remains the "core" of the multilateral trading system.

He also highlighted that "multilateralism remains relevant in this complex environment," adding that "what is important is that we are all working towards noble objectives and driven by a strong desire to serve the people."

According to the DTI, the Ministers adopted the Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration which highlights the importance of the "development dimension" in the work of the WTO, recognizing the multilateral trading system's contribution to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

The declaration also recognized women's participation in trade, contributing to economic growth and sustainable development.

The ministerial declaration also

highlighted the role of services to the global economy, generating more than two-thirds of global economic output and accounts for over half of all jobs.

Meanwhile, on agriculture, WTO said despite the "intense" negotiations during MC13, members were not able to find convergence.

"Divergences remained on public stockholding [PSH] for food security purposes and in respect of timelines, expected outcomes and the scope of the flexibility to be provided to food imports by the most vulnerable countries from export restrictions," the international trade body said.

For her part, WTO Director General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said this has been in the works for over two decades.

"At MC12, we couldn't even agree on a text. Even though there are challenges, for the first time we have a text. We couldn't finish the work on it here. So let us get back to Geneva and deliver!" she said.



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Mga mangingisda sa Palawan nagpasaklolo

Humihingi ng ayuda mula sa gobyerno ang mga mangingisda sa Palawan para sa kanilang mga pamilya.

Ipinabatid ito ng mga mangingisda sa kanilang pakikipag-usap kay Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez.

Ayon kay House Deputy Majority Leader Erwin Tulfo, lumapit sa tanggapan ng ACT-CIS party-list sa Puerto Princesa City ang mga lider ng mahigit 600 mangingisda.

Sa pagpunta ni Romualdez sa Palawan noong Biyernes, kinuha nina Tulfo at kapwa nito kinatawan ng ACT-CIS party-list na si Edvic Yap ang pagkakataon upang makausap ng mga lider ng mangingisda.

Sinabi ng mga mangingisda kay Romualdez na apektado ng pagpasok ng mga sasakyang pangdagat ng China sa West Philippine Sea (WPS) ang kanilang pangangisda dahil itinatay sa mga ito.

Kabilang sa hiling ng mga mangingisda ay tulong para makapag-aral ang kanilang mga anak, pagtatayo ng sarili nilang ice plant at isang gasolinahan upang mas madaling makuha ang kanilang mga pangangailangan.

"Diretsahan na lang, kumuha tayo ng lahat ng listahan ng mga estudyante, bigyan natin ng scholarship. Ganun kasimple. Kung namomroblema kayo sa edukasyon, scholarship na lang diretso na lang," sabi ni Romualdez sa mga mangingisda.

Sinabi ni Romualdez na kakausapin din niya si Palawan Rep. Jose Alvarez para mabigyan ng mas malaking mga bangka ang mga mangingisda.

Nangako rin si Romualdez na agad aayusin ang pagtatayo ng ice plant at gas station sa Aborlan.

"Tapos isang fuel storage diyan sa Aborlan. Kausapin natin si Mr. Ramon Ang para maglagay ng fuel storage facility. Tapos 'yong mas malaking mga bangka ayusin natin," dagdag pa ni Romualdez.

Sinabi ni Romualdez na nais din nitong magkaroon ng alternatibong pangkabuhayan ang mga pamilya ng mga mangingisda tulad ng pagtatayo ng food processing facility sa lugar.

Si Romualdez ang caretaker ng ikatlong distrito ng Palawan matapos na pumanaw si Rep. Edward Hagedorn. (Billy Begas)



Soybeans off 3-year low

CHICAGO- Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) soybean futures turned higher on Friday on signs of bargain buying and short-covering, after hitting three-year lows the previous day, although sluggish exports and hefty global supplies continue to weigh on prices, traders said.

Any rallies were limited by tension between uncertainty over mainland China's import demand and forecasts of a huge Brazilian soybean crop despite a tough growing season, they added.

Agribusiness consultancy StoneX on Friday raised its forecast for

Brazil's 2023/2024 soybean crop to 151.5 million metric tons, citing improved climate conditions in a season marked by excessive heat and dryness in key production regions.

News of global crop trader and processor Bunge accepting 348 contracts delivered against CBOT March soybean futures added some early support to the soy complex, analysts said, signaling commercial demand for the commodity.

The most-active soybean CBOT contract settled up 10-1/2 cents at \$11.51-1/4 a bushel. - Reuters



UN approves creation of food security and nutrition domain

THE United Nations Statistical Commission approved the creation of a new statistical domain on food security and nutrition statistics, marking the first time the highest standard-setting body in the international statistical system incorporates those topics alongside its existing focus on national accounts, population statistics, and agriculture.

The decision will bolster ongoing efforts by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) on the development and harmonization of food security and nutrition (FSN) data and statistics.

With the creation of this new data domain, the three organizations will appear in front of the UN Statistical Commission every two years to report on the state of FSN data, and support the Commission in establishing and implementing a common agenda to advance work in the area in the coming years.

While those three agencies, along with other UN organizations, member countries and various other institutions, have long worked on and with food security and nutrition data, the world can benefit from further work to solidify existing definitions, methods and recommendations and address important gaps with member states to properly assess the state of food security and nutrition at national, regional and global level.

"This is a very important step in consolidating a more systemic approach and commitment to food security and nutrition, which are central to the mandates of FAO, UNICEF and the WHO. It generates a powerful space for dialogue, discussion and technical debates on the data needed for effective policies and actions between country members and UN agencies," José Rosero Moncayo, FAO's Chief Statistician and Director of Statistics Division, Joao

Pedro Azevedo, UNICEF's Chief Statistician and Stephen Mac Feely, WHO's Director of Data and Analytics, said in a joint statement.

The UN Statistical Commission is an intergovernmental body that brings together the heads of all UN members' national statistics authorities. It is responsible for setting statistical standards, developing internationally agreed concepts and methods, and implementing them at the national and international level.

The decision to add a standalone food security and nutrition domain was prompted by the three agencies (FAO, UNICEF and WHO) and policy recommendations endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security, the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all.

Data collection efforts on food security and nutrition themes have long been led by FAO, UNICEF and WHO agencies along with a proliferation of other regional and non-governmental initiatives, underscoring the need for validation and harmonization of measurement methods. Broadly speaking, FAO has long provided authoritative data on food insecurity, UNICEF on key nutrition outcomes such as child stunting and diets in children, and WHO on topics related to healthy diets and nutrition.

The creation of the domain will foster a stronger discussion between UN and its members on topics such as closing data gaps that currently exists on food security and nutrition data, strengthening statistical capacities of country members to collect FSN data, foster the use of the existing data for data policy generation and evaluation, and the harmonization of measurement methods.

It will also give a platform to mobilize resources from international donors towards these efforts.



Coffee craze forces Asia's big exporters to buy Brazilian beans

SOME of Asia's biggest coffee-producing nations are finding it more challenging to satisfy the caffeine cravings in their home markets.

From the streets of Ho Chi Minh City to the cafes of Jakarta, consumers are rapidly developing a taste for coffee, and that's transforming Asian producers into large buyers. While Vietnam and Indonesia still rank as major shippers, they are increasingly sourcing coffee from agriculture powerhouse Brazil to meet the consumption boom.

"It's pretty remarkable how people love their coffee," consultant Judy Ganes said,

referring to Indonesia's thriving cafe culture. Innovative drinks such as a coffee-avocado mix have enticed new consumers—part of a growing movement across Asia as increases in disposable income foster coffee consumption, she added.

Both Indonesia and Vietnam, big growers of the bitter robusta variety favored to make espresso and instant drinks, prefer to export their coffee production while importing for domestic consumption—their own beans are more expensive than Brazil's. Coffee's cool factor at home is a good indication that the imports will continue, especially after

extreme weather and insufficient yields over the past years have weighed on global production.

The world's largest coffee trader, Neumann Kaffee Gruppe, is betting on the shift, opening an import office in Indonesia as it expects demand there will eventually be higher than what the nation's crops will be able to handle.

Indonesian coffee consumption grew about 4 percent annually over the past decade, according to the local exporters association. That's higher than the 2.2-percent growth in global demand expected this year

by the International Coffee Organization, following a period of ups and downs during the pandemic era.

Shipments from Brazil to Indonesia, the world's fourth-largest producer, more than doubled last year, according to Cecafé. "The potential for growth is still very large, especially because consumption per capita is lower than in other parts of the world," said Márcio Ferreira, chairman of the exporters group.

As coffee-drinking habits flourish, Indonesia's bean production has mostly stalled. Demand may exceed output within

the next five to eight years if the same pace continues, said Moelyono Soesilo, head of downstream coffee industry at the Association of Indonesian Coffee Exporters and Industries.

The group is seeking to help farmers manage their estates, looking to boost yields above the current level of 1.1 metric tons per hectare. In comparison, areas that produce a similar coffee variety in Brazil have yields of about 2.5 tons per hectare, according to crop agency Conab.

Meanwhile, shipments from Brazil to Vietnam are also surging—jumping more than sixfold in the 12 months ended in January, Cecafé reported.

Imports from the South American country

are serving Vietnam's instant coffee industry, said Trinh Duc Minh, head of the Buon Ma Thuot Coffee Association in Dak Lak province. Some companies have imported beans to honor signed contracts and make roasted coffee as well, said Tran Thi Lan Anh, deputy director of second-largest exporter Vinh Hiep Co.

Weather is helping bring more imports to the region. The El Niño phenomenon has brought extreme dryness to Southeast Asia this season, reducing production in Vietnam and Indonesia and causing a spike in local prices. Vietnam coffee is currently trading at more than a \$30 premium to Brazilian beans, making South American purchases even more attractive. *Bloomberg News*