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## EDITORIAL

# Gut-wrenching corruption

**R**ice being a staple in Filipino households, any wastage, weather disturbance, or malfeasance that leads to a supply shortage or price increase has the impact of a national crisis.

Which makes the recent Ombudsman order to place 139 officials and employees of the National Food Authority under preventive suspension for six months, the most appropriate response to the alleged sale of NFA rice stocks at prices "greatly disadvantageous to the government," as Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** describes it.

The suspended officials, including NFA administrator Roderico Bioco and assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, are being investigated for allegedly authorizing the sale of milled rice stored in the agency's warehouse at P25 per kilo without the required public bidding. Bioco allegedly authorized the sale of 75,000 bags of NFA rice worth P93.75 million to favored traders.

### Unfit for human consumption

Also suspended over "the controversial sale of rice buffer stocks" are 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers, and 98 warehouse supervisors.

In its defense, the NFA said the agency is allowed to dispose of aging rice stocks "up to 10 percent lower than the mandated price." Its statement added that while freshly milled stocks are reserved for calamities as part of relief goods, the leftover rice aged three months after milling "shall be disposed for inventory management purposes ... before the stocks become unfit for human consumption."

Indeed, according to the rice tariffication law, the NFA is required to maintain the country's rice buffer stock at a level equivalent to 15 to 30 days of national rice consumption, taking into account disasters and emergencies. The agency is also allowed to sell stocks before the rice quality deteriorates.

But the lack of public bidding and selling the stocks to favored retailers are serious infractions that must be investigated and penalized. Were some NFA officials using the agency's mandate to make money on the side by going around established protocols and guidelines?

### Favored rice dealers

It would appear so, given the statement of Federation of Free Farmers' national manager Raul Montemayor asking Tiu Laurel to include in the ongoing probe the NFA's questionable sale of fresh palay in previous administrations. Quoting reports, Montemayor said "billions of pesos worth" of fresh palay were sold at low prices to certain traders, with the sale documents released three or four months later to make it appear that the palay were part of degraded stocks.

Worse than the government losing a significant amount from grossly underpriced rice stocks was how some favored rice dealers were allowed to buy cheap rice from the NFA, which they presumably sell to consumers at grossly inflated prices. Recall that the government had to impose a price cap on rice last year because the staple was being sold upwards of the suggested retail price, and has become a luxury for wage earners and the average Filipino family of five.

### Rice buffer stock

Recall as well that in July last year, the Commission on Audit (COA) reported that the NFA had failed to meet the optimum level of national rice buffer stock requirement of 300,000 metric tons at any given time in 2022. The COA annual report said the agency's rice buffer for the entire year ranged from around 111,000 to 182,000 MT. The deficiency, the COA noted, poses a risk to the country's food security and could result in the shortage of rice supply and subsequent higher prices of rice in the market. Given such shortfall, shouldn't the NFA be buying more grains instead of hurriedly disposing of the buffer stocks at bargain prices?

And should there be stocks turning bad soon, shouldn't the NFA be selling them to Kadiwa, those government-sponsored rolling stores known for selling food stuff at lower than market prices? Imagine how many rice dealers swam in waves upon waves of profit, while Filipino consumers drowned in the same unforgiving current.

### Unholy partnerships

This may be a good time to review protocols related to monitoring rice buffer stocks, when and how they should be disposed of, the minimum acceptable bidding price, and the transparency of the process involved. Publishing the winning bid and the background of the bidder could also ferret out unholy partnerships between complicit government personnel and pliant private entities.

Beyond suspension, the guilty parties must be dealt with severely, with firm and uncompromising sanctions to remind government personnel that they are mere "custodians of government funds," as Tiu Laurel puts it, who cannot enrich themselves "at the expense of millions who struggle every day [to] feed their families."

With Tiu Laurel taking over NFA in the meantime, a top to bottom housecleaning is expected. This is the DA Secretary's chance to make his mark as a trusted presidential appointee whose crucial mandate includes addressing a gut issue that cannot be ignored.



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## Suspension of 139 NFA officials prompts review of agency's policies

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS and JEL SANTOS

President Marcos said the alleged involvement of 139 National Food Authority officials in the questionable

sale of NFA rice calls for an examination of the agency's policies and protocols that may have been ignored that ultimately led to the controversy.

Marcos said this after the Office

of the Ombudsman ordered the suspension of the 139 NFA officials and employees amid ongoing investigations into the alleged disadvantageous sale of rice buffer stocks. ►10

## Suspension of 139 NFA officials prompts review of agency's policies 1◀

In response to questions from Manila-based media, the President said there was more to the issue.

"The situation, actually, does not only involve the anomalous sale of NFA rice," President Marcos said prior to his return to Manila on Wednesday, March 6. "It is also an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without board approval and the proper discussion within the NFA, the DA, and the rest of the Cabinet."

He said implementing the Ombudsman's preventive suspension order was the "safe measure" to address the issue and pave the way for the review of the NFA's policies.

"We have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale, but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," he said.

Among those suspended by the Ombudsman for up to six months are NFA administrator Roderico Bioco, assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers, and 98 warehouse supervisors throughout the country.

Upon the implementation of the preventive suspension of the NFA officials and employees on March 4, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said that he will temporarily head the NFA to "avoid any delays in the services and projects of the agency."

"The preventive suspension would allow the Ombudsman to secure all documents and other evidence

relating, but not limited to, the sale of rice buffer stocks that is greatly disadvantageous to the government," Laurel said.

Following the NFA Council's emergency meeting on Wednesday, March 6, Piolito Santos, NFA assistant administrator for finance and administration, was appointed as officer-in-charge (OIC) of the agency, Laurel said.

Santos, a career service officer who has spent four decades with the NFA, will be taking over the vacated post of Bioco.

The NFA noted that Santos has a bachelor's degree in Agriculture Business, major in Agriculture Economics from the Isabela State University and master's degree in Business Administration, and a doctorate in Organization Development and Planning from Northeastern College.

According to the DA, Santos is set to retire in May.

Meanwhile, Agriculture spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said Laurel will appoint warehouse supervisors.

Laurel has urged NFA personnel to focus on their jobs and not be distracted by the ongoing Ombudsman investigation.

"The NFA is a very important government agency, especially during calamities and other disasters as well as in the lives of millions of poor Filipinos. We cannot lose heart during this challenging time for the NFA and DA family," he said in a statement.

According to De Mesa, the functions to import and directly sell rice to traders were removed from the NFA when the Rice Tariffication Law

was passed.

"Ang natira na lang na function ng NFA ay 'yung tinatawag nating buffer stocking para sa panahon ng kalamidad at disaster. At itong buffer stock na ito ay dapat bibilhin o kukuhanin ng ating National Food Authority sa ating mga lokal na magsasaka (The only remaining function of the NFA is what we call buffer stocking to be prepared in times of calamity and disaster. And this buffer stock should be bought or taken by the National Food Authority from our local farmers)," he said.

De Mesa stated the NFA's primary mandate is to have 15 to 30 days' worth of rice buffer stock, or at least 350,000 metric tons, on reserve in the event of a calamity or disaster.

This is to ensure that the NFA has sufficient supplies to support and assist the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Office of Civil Defense (OCD), National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), and local governments in their prompt response to tragedies and disasters, he added.

To recall, an NFA official had accused several agency executives of improperly disposing of rice buffer stocks without bidding, and at prices that were allegedly disadvantageous to the government.

NFA executives denied any impropriety, claiming the sale followed procedures.

Earlier, Laurel created an investigative panel to probe into allegations that certain NFA officials permitted the sale of milled rice kept in the agency's warehouse for ₱25 per kilo without bidding and after purchasing the grains in palay form for ₱23 per kilo.





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## PBBM bares review of NFA asset disposal procedure after rice sale

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA  
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**P**RESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. said there is now an ongoing review on the disposal procedures being implemented by the National Food Authority (NFA) following the agency's allegedly anomalous sale of 75,000 bags of "deteriorating rice."

He said the ongoing Ombudsman probe would also cover possible lapses by concerned officials and protocol gaps.

"It also is an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without Board approval, without the proper discussion within the NFA [National Food Authority] and with the DA [Department of Agriculture] and with the rest of the Cabinet," Marcos told reporters in an interview in Melbourne Wednesday.

The Ombudsman initiated its probe on the matter based on the letter-complaint submitted by NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations Lemuel R. Pagayunan to the Office of the President last month.

Pagayunan claimed NFA Administrator Roderico R. Bioco and his administrators allegedly manifested partiality or gross negligence when they allowed the sale of aging rice to "preselected" traders for P93.75 million.

The Ombudsman decided to impose a six month preventive suspension to Bioco and 138 other NFA officials and employees.

DA Secretary Francisco T. Laurel Jr. said they are conducting their own comprehensive investigation into the matter, which, he said, would also cover transactions that date back to 2019.

Marcos said he supports the suspension of the concerned officials as a precautionary measure to ensure they will not be able to influence the ongoing probe.

"So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings, such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," Marcos said.





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## DA funds agri projects in Limay, Bataan

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) and its attached agencies are pushing for several projects that would boost the country's food security.

DA yesterday turned over to the local government of Limay, Bataan P5 million for the establishment of a permanent Kadiwa rolling store.

The agency also launched the Zero Kilometer Food Project in the town.

DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the Kadiwa project will benefit 28 farmers' cooperatives and associations with a total 3,826 members. Of the P5 million, P1 million will be the trading capital to support the center.

"A permanent Kadiwa store in Limay promises affordable, fresh and

safe food for local consumers while providing farmers with increased income opportunities. However, this is just the beginning; more initiatives are needed to sustain this momentum," Tiu Laurel said.

DA also led the signing of an agreement with the local government unit of Limay, Bataan Peninsula State University and Limay Polytechnic College for the launch of a Zero Kilometer Food Project in the area.

Zero KM is an initiative launched last year in the towns of Hermosa and Dinalupihan. The project promotes healthy eating while minimizing cost and impact on the environment by consuming locally-grown fruits, vegetable and other agricultural products.

Meanwhile, the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) said the inaugural import of fresh chilled tuna from the port of Tahuna, Indonesia worth over two metric tons were unloaded at the General Santos Fish Port Complex last month.

PFDA said recipients of the imported products were JFRCO Corp. and Tenpoint Manufacturing Corp. through the Glaukos Trading Corp.

The agency said the move is seen to strengthen international ties while also opening new avenues for trade and cooperation between Indonesia and General Santos City as well as in helping the government's intent of adopting a flexible policy towards the attainment of food security.





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## DA plans KADIWA in Bataan

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) said on Thursday that it has opened another permanent location for its KADIWA market project within a trading center in Bataan.

In a statement, the DA said the trading post is expected to benefit 28 farmers' cooperatives and associations with a total 3,826 members. The project costs around P5 million.

"A permanent KADIWA store in Limay, Bataan promises affordable, fresh, and safe food for local consumers while providing farmers with increased income opportunities," Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiù Laurel, Jr. said.

KADIWA stores were rolled in various localities at the height of the coronavirus pandemic to facilitate access between growers and buyers amid mobility restrictions.

The agency said that it would provide interest free loans to local producers from the province in partnership with the local government of unit. — **Adrian H. Halili**





## Suspensyon ng NFA execs, hakbang vs maling gawain

PARA kay Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr., isang "safe measure" kontra sa maling gawain ang suspendihin ang 139 opisyal at empleyado ng National Food Authority, kabilang na ang pinuno nito.

Pagsuporta na rin ang pahayag ng Pangulo sa desisyon ng Office of the Ombudsman na patawan ng anim na buwan na preventive suspension sina NFA administrator Roderico Bioco, NFA assistant administrator for operations John Roberto Hermano, 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers, at 98 warehouse supervisors.

Aniya, ang situwasyon sa NFA ay hindi lamang nagsasangkot sa maanomalyang pagbebenta ng bigas kundi may ilang pamamaraan sa ahensiya ang isinagawa ng walang board approval at hindi idinaraan sa tamang talakayan.

Ayon sa Chief Executive sa taped interview habang nasa Australia ito, ang transaksyon ay ginawa ng walang go signal ng Department of Agriculture (DA) at "with the rest of the Cabinet."

Ayon kay Pangulong Marcos sa isang taped interview habang nasa Melbourne, Australia.

Pinatawan ng OMB ng anim na buwang preventive suspension ang nasa 139 na opisyal ng National Food Administration.

Sinabi naman ni DA Sec. Francisco Tiu Laurel na nag-ugat ang imbestigasyon sa umano'y pagbebenta ng NFA ng 75,000 kabang bigas na buffer stock sa ilang trader sa P25 kada kilo o paluging presyo.

Hindi naman kasama sa suspension order ang accuser na si Assistant Administrator for Marketing Operations Lemuel Pagayunan.

KRIS JOSE





## *DA chief designates new NFA OIC*

**AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. designated former Assistant Administrator Piolito Santos as the new officer-in-charge of the National Food Authority (NFA).**

Laurel announced the designation of Santos during the NFA council meeting.

This came two days after the implementation of the preventive suspension order of the Office of the Ombudsman against 139 NFA officials and employees nationwide amid the

probe into the alleged improper sale of the rice buffer stock.

Laurel said the operations of the NFA must continue despite the ongoing investigation.

"The NFA is a very important government agency, especially during calamities and other disasters as well as in the lives of millions of poor Filipinos," he said in a Zoom meeting with NFA employees.

"We cannot lose heart during this challenging time for the NFA and DA family," he added.

Santos, meanwhile, vowed

to ensure order under his watch.

"This will be a fair and very responsible leadership of the National Food Authority," he said.

"Babaguhinnatinang pamamaraan ng pagbebenta ng bigas sa ating mga outlets para iyong nangyaring nakaraan mga problema nangyariy hindi na maulit pa (We will improve our way of rice selling to our outlets to ensure that the previous problem will not happen again)," he added.

He added warehouse operations must resume amid the peak harvest season. **PNA**





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## EDITORIAL

# El Niño causes big losses to farmers

**T**HE current El Niño weather phenomenon has caused extensive damage to agriculture, with nearly P1 billion worth of crops as of the end of last month.

According data from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), Western Visayas posted the highest crop losses worth P564 million, followed by Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan) with P319.8 million, and the Ilocos region with P54.5 million.

The agency reported that as of the end of February, 24 provinces in Luzon and a province in the Visayas had potential for meteorological drought conditions, 17 provinces for dry spell, while 10 provinces for dry conditions.

The Department of Agriculture, for its part, has reported that in Cagayan Valley, corn farmers have incurred P180 million in losses, mostly in rainfed farms.

In Negros Occidental, the provincial government has reported more than P55 million in losses to rice and corn

planted in 1,064 hectares.

The total losses in the agriculture sector could shoot up in the weeks ahead until April when El Niño is expected to wind down, according to experts.



***The concerned government agencies appear to be responding quite well to the adverse impact of El Niño on the agriculture sector***

However, the government has already rendered more than P362 million worth of assistance to farmers in the Mimaropa region who had borne the brunt of the dry spell.

The weather phenomenon, characterized by below-normal rainfall conditions, has so far affected 16,709 farmers and fisherfolk and nearly 15,000 hectares of crops around the country.

Water interruptions due to El Niño have also been reported in Western Visayas and the Zamboanga Peninsula.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration declared the onset of El Niño on July 4 last year. The government's Task Force El Niño said the impact of a strong El Niño would affect 80 of the country's 82 provinces.

Farmers are appealing to the government to provide them with subsidies and other forms of assistance to help them recover.

Government weather forecasters said about 240,000 hectares of farms might be directly affected by the drought, mostly in the northern portions of Isabela and southern portions of Cagayan.

It is good that cloud seeding operations have started in Cagayan Valley to generate rains in agricultural areas in the provinces of Cagayan, Isabela and Nueva Vizcaya.

These should be carried out as well in other areas affected by the drought.

The concerned government agencies appear to be responding quite well to the adverse impact of El Niño on the agriculture sector.

We hope our farmers recover fully from this setback in the months ahead.





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## Where did P152b cash go, NFA asked amid suspensions

By Maricel V. Cruz

ALBAY Rep. Joey Salceda is asking the **National Food Authority** to shed light on the P152 billion in cash the agency was supposed to have received from 2018 to 2022 from government subsidies and rice sales, which must then be subjected to an exhaustive review by the Commission on Audit.

Earlier, President Marcos said the suspension of more than 130 NFA officials and employees involved in other

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questionable actions outside the anomalous sale of rice was a "safety measure."

"The situation does not only involve the anomalous sale of NFA rice.

It also is an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without board approval, without the proper discussion within the NFA and the DA, and with the rest of the Cabinet," the President said.

House Deputy Majority Leader Erwin Tulfo also lambasted the NFA for alleged "mekus-mekus" or manipulation of its rice supplies, which led to the suspension of NFA officials and employees.

Tulfo berated NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco after he admitted that the sale of rice was not done through proper bidding. The lawmaker also castigated Bioco over how he chose the companies to which the rice was sold.

"That's your excuse, that you sold it for P25 per kilo, as is, where is, because it's close to rotted when you sold it?" Tulfo asked the NFA official.

"Yes, because that's the maximum allowable price," Bioco replied in the hearing.

Salceda's inquiry into the NFA fund

came after Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga, chair of the House Committee on Agriculture and Food, conducted a hearing on the reported anomalous sale of 75,000 sacks of buffer stock rice to commercial traders.

Salceda, vice chairperson of the agriculture committee, urged the 19th Congress "not to limit its investigation merely to the P93 million sale in question this year," but to include all sales of buffer stock since the Rice Tariffication Law took effect in 2019.

"The NFA is supposed to have received a total of P85.7 billion in national government subsidies and another P66.3 billion in sales of rice stocks from 2018 to 2022. That totals to P152 billion from those five years alone," said Salceda, who also chairs the House Committee on Ways and Means.

"That is additive. Even with a loss incurred of P20 billion – or the difference between the direct cost of rice and the sale of rice – that's still P132 billion to account for," he noted.

The Rice Tariffication Law earlier limited the NFA's role to buffer stocking from local farmers. But Salceda noted that "in theory, the NFA should sometimes make gains, rather than merely make consistent losses, if it can auction its rice stocks." **With Charles Dantes**



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NEWS

## More issues crop up over NFA deals

Suspended National Food Authority (NFA) Administrator Roderico Bioco defended the sale of old rice stocks to private traders during a House hearing on Thursday into the allegedly anomalous deal. He said he authorized the "distress selling" to prevent wastage, adding that the NFA also sold rice stocks to private firms without holding a bidding in 2021 and 2022, before he took over. —STORY BY JEANNETTE I. ANDRADE **AG**

# House inquiry raises more issues in NFA rice sale

By Jeannette I. Andrade  
@jiandradeINQ

Angry lawmakers scolded officials of the **National Food Authority (NFA)** on Thursday after they learned that the agency sold its buffer stock to private traders at P25 a kilo when the market price of the grain was at P70 a kilo.

"Why didn't you sell to the government? Why did you sell to a private corporation?" Deputy Minority Leader and ACT-CIS party list Rep. Erwin Tulfo asked suspended NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco.

Bioco and other officials of the agency were summoned to a *motu proprio* inquiry of the House committee on agriculture to explain the sale of 75,000 bags of "deteriorating or aging" NFA rice worth P93.75 million to two private rice traders at low prices and without the NFA Council's approval.

Earlier this week, Bioco and 138 other NFA officials were placed by the Office of the Ombudsman under preventive suspension amid an ongoing investigation into the allegedly anomalous transaction.

"In November [and] December, the House leadership was looking for cheap rice. People



**MOTU PROPRIO** The House committee on agriculture is conducting an investigation into the supposedly anomalous sale of old National Food Authority rice stocks to private traders at lower prices and without a bidding. —INQUIRER FILE PHOTO

were starving because at that time, the price of rice was so high at P70 per kilo, only to find out now that you had cheap rice (at P25 per kilo)," Tulfo said to Bioco.

Tulfo noted that the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) had even wanted to purchase 100,000 bags of rice from the NFA in August. But Social Welfare Undersecretary Aliah Dimaporo said their request was turned down and the NFA instead authorized them to buy from outside sources at P2,250 per sack compared to its price of P1,250 per sack.

In his defense, Bioco argued that the NFA administrator was authorized to decide on the disposal of rice stocks even without the approval of the NFA Council, adding that the disposal was exempted from public auction.

According to Bioco, before he assumed his post in January 2023, the NFA had been selling rice stocks to private traders, specifically in 2021 and 2022, when sales reached three to four million bags of rice, also without bidding.

### Distress selling

He even said the volume of stocks sold to private traders was reduced, mainly due to his "prudence" and it was only in December and January that he authorized "distress selling" to prevent supply wastage.

As for the DSWD request, suspended NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations John Robert Hermiano said they could not fill the order because the DSWD needed 845,000 sacks for the One-Time Rice Allowance for government workers.

At the time, the NFA only had a "residual volume" of rice that was of "less acceptable quality," he claimed.

SAGIP party list Rep. Rodante Marcoleta, on the other hand, pointed out that Commission on Audit Circular No. 89-296 only provides five methods for the disposal of government assets—public auction, negotiated sale, barter, transfer to other agencies and destruction—all of which require the NFA Council's approval.

House agriculture and food panel Chair Quezon Rep. Wilfredo Mark Enverga said that the matter actually involved at least 130,000 bags of rice sold without bidding by the NFA to the government's disadvantage.

According to Enverga, he was informed that apart from the 75,000 bags of rice reportedly sold to two traders, there were some 55,000 bags sold to other private traders in the Zamboanga peninsula, Davao and Bicol regions and in Central and Western Visayas.

The committee's vice chair, Albay Rep. Joey Salceda, said the panel should look into the NFA's financial transactions from 2018 to 2023 and not limit the inquiry to the questionable sale of rice to the private sector early this year. **INQ**





## Pork belly retail price hits P420/kilo

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The retail price of pork belly or *liempo* has reached as high as P420 per kilo amid the upward trend in its cost, according to data from the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The retail price of *liempo* has increased by P20 per kilo in the last two weeks from its previous price of P400 per kilo in Metro Manila markets on Feb. 21, based on data from the DA.

As of yesterday, the retail price of pork shoulder ranged between P290 and P370 per kilo and for pork *liempo*, between P340 and P420 per kilo.

The retail price of pork *liempo* should only range between P340 and P360 per kilo as the farmgate price ranges between P170 and P220 per kilo, according to farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura executive director Jayson Cainglet.

"Even if there will be additional P150 (per kilo) expenses for traders, it should not reach P400 (per kilo)," Cainglet told **The STAR**.

Cainglet added that because of high retail prices of pork, the consumption has declined, adding that consumers shifted to eggs and chicken.

"Unlike before, the retail

price of pork is high, that's why there is a drop in consumption. There is an increase in chicken and egg (consumption), which is okay as long as it's local production," Cainglet said.

The retail price of medium-sized eggs ranged between P6 and P8.50 per kilo while whole chicken ranged between P150 and P220 per kilo.

"We still have African swine fever, that is why it is difficult for our hog raisers to bring down the production cost. Again, if there is enough support for them like feeds, the farmgate price will go down," Cainglet added.

He said that there is also a big disparity between the farmgate price and the retail price of pork, as it should only be sold for not more than P300 per kilo and not reach up to P360 to P400 per kilo.

The DA has said that it is eyeing possible price manipulation in the surge in the retail prices of pork in the Visayas and Mindanao.

The price hike occurred even as farmgate prices of pork remained low at P180 per kilo.

DA Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa confirmed that the retail price of pork in the Visayas and Mindanao increased by P10 per kilo.





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## GOTCHA

JARIUS BONDOC



### Cyanide fishing: scourge on humans, catch, corals

Chinese maritime militia reportedly use cyanide to poach in Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal. Not content with stealing in our waters, they destroy nature. No different from *akyat-bahay* (porch climbers) who wreck doors, windows, cabinets.

A man-made compound, sodium cyanide comes in gas or liquid. Governments regulate its use in making paper, textiles and plastics. It is in chemicals for developing photographs. Cyanide salts are applied in metallurgy: electroplating, metal cleaning and removing gold from ore. Cyanide gas is a pesticide for vermin in ships and buildings. (Source: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Cyanide illegally abounds in gold mines in Mount Diwalwal, Moncayo, Davao de Oro. The liquid is poured in water ponds of ore. Dislodged, gold is strained by workers with bare hands. Ponds empty into rivers that flow down to rice fields and fruit orchards into the sea. As poison spreads, local officials see, hear, speak nothing.

Most prevalent illegal use is in fishing. "Liquid cyanide is squirted on tropical fish to stun it," said Prof. Michael Atrigenio, Marine Science PhD. "It is then revived in clean water and sold at high prices to marine aquarium aficionados. But many buyers lose interest because poisoned fish die in three months."

Worse is in illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) commercial fishing. Catchers spew cyanide in coral reefs. Fish that live, feed, rest in the crevices are paralyzed. Prize catches are *lapulapu* (grouper), *mameng* (Napoleon wrasse), bass, cod, salmon, edible bull huss shark and other rockfish. Plus lobster, mantis shrimp, sea cucumber.

Chinese thieves sell them in Hong Kong, Macau and Hainan. Some are even "exported" back to the Philippines for fine dining. (Lovers of large *galung-gong* [round scad] that Chinese poach in Philippine seas need not worry. Those are pelagic or upper water feeders, thus spared from cyanide. Chinese sellers soak them in another poison, formalin, to harden the tissue and look fresh.)

Cyanided fish are limp. Poison gathers in the liver and muscles. Beware in public markets.

Woe to the person who ingests those. He will suffer dizziness, vomiting, weakness, body aches and fainting, Atrigenio said. One who devours too much can die of liver disease.

Corals, sessile animals, take root on the seabed. They first turn white from cyanide poisoning, then black from algae and eventually disintegrate. Without cor-

als, bottom-dwelling fish have nowhere to mate, lay eggs, feed and grow.

Like the use of explosives and electric shock, cyanide fishing is forbidden worldwide. Filipino illegal fishers can be handcuffed and arrested on sight at sea or in public markets.

Chinese poachers should be treated likewise. Enough of the leniency they were accorded under presidents Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Rodrigo Duterte.

The 1998 Fisheries Code and the 2015 Anti-IUU Fishing Act are strict. Violators face fine of five times the value of their illegal catch even if co-mingled with legal ones, or the following amounts, whichever is higher:

- P30,000 for municipal fishing;
- P300,000 for small-scale commercial fishing;
- P1,500,000 for medium-scale commercial fishing and
- P3,000,000 for large-scale commercial fishing.

Violators can be imprisoned for five to ten years.

Time was when Philippine coastguards and fisheries officers interdicted Chinese poachers in the West Philippine Sea. Aside from those mentioned above, confiscated from them were shark fins, manta rays, *pawikan* (sea turtles), *taklobo* (giant clams) and fan corals. Numerous steel poaching vessels stayed anchored in Puerto Princesa Bay, Palawan, as the Chinese faced trial.

But Macapagal-Arroyo was soft on poachers. Succumbing to Chinese embassy pressures, Malacañang made prosecutors dismiss charges.

That enraged Palawan folk. Twice they lay down on the airport runway to prevent poachers from fleeing. Twice too, poacher ships were torched.

About that time Macapagal-Arroyo inked with China a Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking to survey Philippine seabed. One-sixth of the survey area was territorial waters; the rest was Philippine exclusive economic zone. Hoodwinked by Beijing, Malacañang never got a copy of the study. The Supreme Court recently declared the JMSU illegal.

Professing love for President Xi Jinping, Duterte in 2017 let Chinese poachers into WPS. The aliens got a better deal than Filipino fishers who were bound by the two laws above. No limits were set on the volume, area and season for poaching:

\* \* \*

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## 'NFA lost P112 M after rice sale to traders'

By BELLA CARIASO

The National Food Authority (NFA) has incurred losses of at least P112 million after the sale of 150,000 bags of rice at only P25 per kilo to some traders, according to a farmers' group.

Jayson Cainglet, Samahang Industriyang Agrikultura executive director, noted that while corruption at the NFA is an open secret, officials have become more daring in their illegal activities.

"What happened was very glaring. Before, the anomalies we heard at the NFA underwent bidding or auction. In this recent incident, there was no bidding. Traders were chosen, only two (traders) benefited. That was a red flag already," Cainglet pointed out.

He noted that the NFA bought palay from local farmers at P23 per kilo and sold some of its stocks to the traders at only P25 per kilo.

"It was OK if the rice was sold to the agencies of government, like the Department of Social Welfare and Development and Kadiwa, as it will benefit the ordinary people. But it was sold to private traders," Cainglet said.

Noting that the NFA spends between P13 and P14 per kilo for the milling of palay, Cainglet explained that this meant the agency "incurred losses of P12 to P13 per kilo."

"If it involved 150,000 bags (of rice), then it means P112 million in losses to the NFA," he said.

He added that the NFA could have, at the least, sold the rice at P40 per kilo.

"We expect that with the investigation of the DA (Department of Agriculture), the Office of the Ombudsman, the House of Representatives and the Senate, those liable will be made accountable," Cainglet said.

The NFA Council has appointed Piloto Santos, NFA assistant administrator for finance and administration, as officer-in-charge amid the six-month preventive suspension of administrator Roderico Bioco and 138 other officials and employees amid the questionable sale.

Santos said he would prioritize the resumption of operations of NFA warehouses, noting that the "peak harvest season has already started."

He said the NFA has a total budget of P17.2 billion for palay procurement.

### Retail prices seen dropping by P4/kilo

Meanwhile, Cainglet said a P4-per-kilo drop in the retail prices of rice is to be expected amid the peak harvest season of palay, which runs until April.

He noted that the farmgate price of palay already dropped between P22 and P23 per kilo for fresh palay and between

P26 and P28 per kilo for dry palay, from the previous P28 to P30 per kilo.

"We expect that the farmgate price of palay will further go down to P25 (per kilo)," Cainglet said in a message to **The STAR**.

A 36 percent spike in the retail price of rice was recorded on March 1, 2024 compared to the same period last year, according to data from the DA.

"The major causes of the spike in the retail price were logistics and cost to produce, not only for rice, but also for vegetables, livestock and chicken. There was an increase in the post-production expenses of our farmers and those who transport agricultural products," Cainglet said.

Based on price watch monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of local regular-milled rice went up by as high as P18 per kilo, or a 36 percent increase. On March 1, 2023 the prices for the staple ranged between P32 and P40 per kilo, compared to this year's P50 per kilo.

On the other hand, the retail price of local well-milled rice increased by as much as P13 per kilo.

Prevailing prices, as of March 1, are between P45 to P58 per kilo—a 22 percent increase compared to last year's P37 to P45 per kilo prices.

Data from the Bureau of Plant Industry data showed that the country's rice imports skyrocketed by almost 85 percent year-on-year in the first two months of the year as importers delivered their commitment to bring in more stocks to ensure supply amid El Niño threats.

Total rice imports from January to February this year reached 728,254.49 metric tons, compared to the 394,553.664 MT recorded in the same period last year.

Broken down, about 424,650.8 MT of rice entered the country in January while the remaining 303,603.69 MT were imported in February, based on BPI data.

The bulk of the imports, about 390,997.22 MT, came from Vietnam. It was followed by Thailand at 195,921.38 MT and Pakistan at 96,627.5 MT. The other sources were Myanmar (41,160 MT), Japan (1,815.37 MT), Cambodia (1,6210 MT), India (108 MT) and Italy (5.03 MT).

Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesperson Arnel de Mesa said the higher rice import arrivals were a result of the "engagement" between the government and importers to bring in more supply in preparation for El Niño.

The Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement earlier explained that rice imports this year have become "more economically favorable" as global rice prices have been on a "downward trend."

— With Jasper Emmanuel Arcalas





## 'Sale of rice buffer stock above board'

BY WENDELL VIGILIA

THE suspended administrator of the **National Food Authority (NFA)** yesterday defended the sale of rice buffer stocks to select traders, saying it was not irregular even if the sale did not undergo public bidding.

Roderico Bioco said told a hearing of the House agriculture committee that the agency's rules were not violated in the alleged anomalous sale of the buffer stocks which, he said, were disposed of before becoming unfit for human consumption.

"We ensure the sale of stocks before they become unfit for consumption. There are no irregularities in the disposition

of our stocks," he told the panel chaired by Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga which conducted motu proprio investigation into the sale of milled rice at only P25 per kilo despite having bought the grains in palay form at P23 per kilo.

Bioco said the disposition of old buffer stocks is a regular function of the NFA, which he said is exempted from public bidding because of Commission on Audit (COA) circular 89-296 issued on Jan. 27, 1989.

Because of the sale, the NFA now has to replace buffer stocks that must be maintained at 15 to 30 days computed consumption

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## SALE

equivalent to 350,000 metric tons, which are held on standby for emergencies including rice shortages and calamities.

The alleged anomalies led to the suspension of Bioco and 138 other NFA officials. The Ombudsman, in a March 1 directive, imposed the six-month preventive suspension to enable investigators to access documents and possible witnesses.

NFA assistant administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan told he hearing the sale of the buffer stocks to alleged favored bidders violated Presidential Decree No. 4, which provides that large volumes of stocks sold through the agency's central office requires the approval of its council and has to undergo public bidding.

Pagayunan said he started to question the sale of the milled rice after discovering the NFA central offices' memo to traders, because the stocks are usually sold by provincial or regional offices and the central office.

"If there is no public bidding, the council should approve the disposition," he told the committee.

Bioco, however, said the regional offices have given the green light for the central office to dispose of the aging stocks. "They make the recommendations, qualification, requirements for those interested to buy. We followed guidelines," he said.

Rep. Erwin Tulfo (PL, ACT-CIS) said the anomaly is glaring as the buffer stock was sold to private companies instead of government agencies such as Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Bureau of Corrections and Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) "where stocks of rice are mostly needed."

"Sa tingin ko may plano talaga na i-hokus pokus ito, i-mekus-mekus itong mga stock na ito para maibenta sa mga private corporations (I think there's really a plan to pull a fast one to be able to sell these to private corporations)," he told the committee.

President Marcos Jr. in a recorded interview on Wednesday, said government took "the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored."

He also said the government is looking not just into the anomalous sale but also at NFA procedures that were undertaken without proper discussions and approval of the NFA, the Department of Agriculture, and rest of the Cabinet.

Sen. Cynthia Villar yesterday said the Committee on Agriculture, Food, and Agrarian Reform which she chairs will conduct hearings on the alleged anomalous sale even if Congress is already on a summer break by March 23.

She said her staff members are looking for a "common" time and date of senators so the panel can start the investigation.

Villar said she also wants that the hearing be held jointly with the Blue Ribbon committee, and for the minority bloc to attend because it involves graft and corruption of government officials.

The Senate probe is based on a resolution filed by Sen Imee Marcos. — *With Jocelyn Montemayor and Raymond Africa*





## Editorial

### El Niño weakening, but we're not out of the woods yet

**I**N its latest update, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reported that the prevailing El Niño is gradually weakening after peaking in November to January.

There is a 60-percent chance of El Niño conditions persisting in March through May, the WMO noted. Still, the newest forecast is much less dire than the projection last year that the weather phenomenon could last until the second quarter of this year.

The El Niño we are experiencing now may be less severe than what we went through in 2016 and 2019, but it doesn't mean that the country has been spared from its devastating effects.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council has reported P1.05 billion in agricultural damage from El Niño.

Drought and dry spell conditions have parched 17,718 hectares of farmlands, with Western Visayas being the hardest hit, absorbing P678.7 million in crop losses.

Bulalacao town in Oriental Mindoro, which is in the midst of a scorching dry spell, has declared a state of calamity. So has Zamboanga City, where drinking water is already being rationed.

In Negros Occidental, six barangay (villages) have been struggling with a shortage of drinking and irrigation water since December.

The water level in dams supplying Metro Manila continues to recede and could become critical once summer sets in. The region is also bracing for a heat wave, with temperatures predicted to soar to 34 degrees Celsius.

Forest fires fueled by extremely dry conditions are raging in Benguet.

The El Niño may be on the wane, but we haven't dodged the bullet yet.

At least 275,000 hectares of rice fields, producing an estimated yield of 1.1 million metric tons of palay (unmilled rice), are under threat from El Niño, according to the Department of Agriculture.

The losses in agriculture could have the biggest impact on the economy. According to the World Bank, it could affect "downstream agricultural processing, input production and agriculture-related trading and transporting."

Because over a quarter of the country's workforce is in the farm sector, "any shocks to agriculture lead to reverberations across the entire economy, with serious implications on welfare, food security and national poverty levels," the World Bank said.

Following the 2016 El Niño, the government drew up the Roadmap to Address the Impact of El Niño, or RAIN. In the World Bank's assessment, while the program was successful in stabilizing food prices and supplies, government agencies could have responded faster in addressing water scarcity and drought aid delivery.

More efficient forecasting systems could have given farmers more time to save their crops, the World Bank said.

Following the first alert in March of a strong El Niño, the Marcos administration announced a National Action Plan to "increase resiliency of communities."

The plan focuses on five key sectors that will bear the brunt of the weather phenomenon: water supply, agriculture, energy, health and public safety.

Among the proposed interventions are an intensified water conservation effort, maintaining a stable supply of basic food commodities, minimizing power interruptions, and a close monitoring and reporting of El Niño-related disease outbreaks.

The public needs to know if the plan has been fully implemented. Initiatives like offering P25,000 in interest-free loans to affected farmers and fisherfolk are commendable, but there are no available figures on how many have applied for the loans and how many applications have been approved.

As part of the government's El Niño response, P31.18 billion has been earmarked in the 2024 national budget for irrigation projects. We wonder how many of those projects are underway, considering that the budget was approved only last December.

The Agriculture department had planned to build more water-impounding systems and even solar-powered irrigation. The El Niño may be over before any of these projects could get off the ground.

The department assures that rice stocks are adequate, but added that rice prices could change from day to day.

The lack of foresight and sense of urgency could reduce what is a comprehensive strategy to cushion the effects of El Niño into a package of stopgap measures that defeats the objective to increase the resiliency of communities.





## NFA brouhaha



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THE Ombudsman has ordered the suspension of 138 officials and employees of the National Food Administration (NFA), including Administrator Roderico Bioco, over an allegedly anomalous rice sale.

Prior to this, on February 12, NFA Assistant Administrator Lemuel Pagayunan sent a letter to the NFA Council complaining about what he said was the improper disposition of NFA rice stocks to selected private traders.

Pagayunan noted the following irregularities:

- The stocks sold were not deteriorating but were fit for consumption and disposition in the natural course of NFA operations.

- The sale to private traders did not have NFA Council approval, and the administrator awarded contracts to selected traders at a disadvantageous price of P25 per kilo.

- No bidding was conducted for the sale, resulting in foregone revenues for the government.

- Given that the country is experiencing a rice supply shortage resulting in soaring rice prices, the complainant questioned why the NFA administrator disposed of the stocks even before these were supposed to "deteriorate."

Bioco immediately issued a

response to the NFA Council on February 14. The main points of his reply are as follows:

- Though the stocks were still fit for human consumption, these were already exhibiting "deteriorating quality due to prolonged storage in the warehouse."

- The NFA Council has a policy, dated Jan. 25, 2022, regarding the warehousing/storage of stocks, and the stocks were disposed of in accordance with the "approved NFA Council resolution."

- The sale to private traders was based on NFA criteria that the buyers complied with. The traders were also deemed most capable and qualified by the NFA because they were "engaged in the business of rice milling with the capability and capacity to reprocess aging stocks."

- As to the selling price, Bioco claimed that the NFA just followed a Feb. 18, 2020 bulletin, issued by then-NFA administrator Judy Carol Dansal, that set the price at P25 per kilo.

A rejoinder was immediately

submitted by Pagayunan the following day, in which he highlighted the following:

- Based on several NFA laboratory tests, the disposed rice stocks were fit for human consumption.

- Due to the negligence of the administrator, the rice had reached near "deteriorating" stage as he failed to distribute the stocks as quickly as possible despite the rice supply shortage.

- While the NFA Council approved guidelines for "NFA's acquisition, maintenance and disposition of buffer stocks," the sale to private traders should have been subject to the "scrutiny, evaluation and approval of the NFA Council." Said sale to the private sector was not even submitted to the council for approval.

- A new memorandum issued by the administrator himself stipulated that the replacement cost of WD1 stocks (W1 to W3 categories are used by the NFA to determine stock quality) is P27 per kilo. Why then was the old price of P25 per kilo as set by the previous NFA administrator used as the guideline for disposing of the stock?

- As there was no need for the "reconditioning" of the rice stocks since these were fit for human consumption, the purpose of re-bagging the NFA stocks was really

to sell these in the commercial market.

- The administrator failed to explain why no bidding was conducted and why specific traders were directly contracted to buy the rice stocks. Thus, it alleged that the choice of the buyers was left to the sole discretion of the administrator.

Based on the above proceedings and objectively looking at the situation, one cannot help but raise several concerns.

First is why would the NFA allow rice stocks to reach near deterioration given the country's serious rice supply shortage. Allowing stocks to remain in warehouses for months without urgently disposing of them is tantamount to gross negligence of duty, particularly when many poor Filipinos are going hungry.

Second, if these can be sold to a few selected millers, why not sell to Kadiwa stores or local government units (LGUs) before the stocks become too old, as what was done during the Covid-19 pandemic? NFA stocks surely do not age at the same time as the agency knows which came first and which should be disposed of before these get spoiled.

Third, why was there no bidding

➤ **Finer B3**

### ■ FINER FROM B2

## NFA

and why did the sale not warrant obtaining NFA Council approval? Does the council allow the disposition of stocks to selected traders without a bidding process?

To be on the safe side and to impress that the transactions were above board, the administrator could have easily informed the council about the planned sale and secured its approval. After all, the NFA Council is the corporate decision-making body of NFA and its members include most of the government's economic managers.

It is a lame excuse to argue that there were guidelines on such a trans-

action, particularly if Pagayunan's claim that such pertain only to the warehousing or storage of stocks but not on sales — especially to selected private millers — is true.

An as-is-where is bidding would have surely attracted better bids than P25 per kilo considering the current retail price of commercial rice. Surely, Bioco as an experienced business person knows these realities.

Fourth, why did the NFA settle for the P25 per kilo price using the lame excuse that it was pegged in the 2020 guidelines issued by the previous NFA chief. At that time, rice was priced at P30 to P35 per kilogram and NFA rice was being sold in Kadiwa stores and by the LGUs for assistance programs.

I am sure that Bioco knows that rice prices have significantly increased in

the last three years. Why settle for a price that is grossly disadvantageous to the government?

Finally, admitting that the stocks were still fit for human consumption and hence would not need reprocessing, and then requiring prospective buyers to re-bag the rice under their brand names so it could be sold at a higher price is blatantly injurious not only to the government but also the consuming public.

Commercial rice at the wholesale level is priced at around P45 to P48/kilo and when sold at the retail level as regular milled it can fetch up to P50-P54 per kilo. Even the low-class rice for animal feed is priced much higher than P25.

Bioco has a lot of explaining to do.

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## BRIEFS

### Senator seeks rice law review

A PHILIPPINE senator on Thursday filed a resolution seeking a review of the Rice Tarification Law (RTL) citing the law's failure to boost rice production and support farmers.

Under Senate Resolution No. 956, filed by Senator Ana Theresia N. Hontiveros-Baraquel, the government is urged to consult with farmers and other stakeholders to conduct a comprehensive review of the RTL and procurement practices of the National Food Authority (NFA).

"These investigations will also aid in enhancing the implementation of the RTL in the period remaining till its expiration in 2025," she said in the resolution.

The law, which was enacted in 2019, deregulated rice imports, allowing private parties to import a tariff of 25% on grain brought in from Southeast Asia.

It also established the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), which is intended to modernize the rice industry and is funded by import tariffs generated from the RTL. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**



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## Nothing irregular in selling of rice stocks, says suspended NFA chief

By Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio

THERE are no irregularities in the alleged improper selling of rice stocks by the National Food Authority (NFA) because the agency followed regulations at its disposal, NFA Administrator Roderico R. Bioco told a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"There is no irregularity in our disposition of this (rice stocks)," Mr. Bioco said as he explained that the sale of NFA rice to commercial traders was done by the book.

He said the NFA follows a "6-3 rule" when it comes to the selling of rice buffer stocks to private rice millers.

"We have a general 6-3 rule as the general guideline when we buffer (rice stocks) for relief," Mr. Bioco said to the House panel in mixed English and Filipino. "Rice is stocked in *palay* form for six months, after

six months it is kept in milled rice form for three months as reserve for calamity relief."

The House panel had called for the inquiry to scrutinize the alleged "disadvantageous sale" of rice stocks to private rice millers as a report surfaced that some "75,000 bags" of "aging and deteriorating" rice were sold without following the proper guidelines.

NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations Lemuel B. Pagayunan said that the sale of rice stocks was "irregular" as it did not follow bidding procedures nor had the approval from the NFA council.

Mr. Bioco said that the disposal of rice does not require bidding "because this is a regular function of disposal." He added that rice for disposal is exempted from the procurement law.

He added that the rice being stocked by the NFA is ranked accordingly into "excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor" conditions. He added that rice

falling under "fair" conditions should have to be disposed before it further deteriorates into "poor conditions" and no longer be fit for human consumption.

To prevent losses in rice stocks, NFA resorts to disposing of rice stocks to requesting government agencies before considering private rice millers, he said.

"We try to dispose it to various programs of the government while ensuring that it is safe for human consumption," Mr. Bioco said. "We try to give it to government agencies if the quality of the rice is okay, if not we sell it."

NFA has to resort to selling rice to rice traders and retailers as the government cannot shoulder all deteriorating rice stocks.

A total of 139 NFA officials were placed on preventive suspension by the Office of the Ombudsman over allegations of improper disposal of rice stocks to private millers.





## Tulfo dinikdik NFA:

# Murang bigas hinokus pokus

Sermon ang inabot ng pamunuan ng **National Food Authority (NFA)** sa pagdinig ng Kamara de Representantes kaugnay ng pagbebenta ng bigas ng ahensiya sa mga negosyante sa halagang P25 kada kilo.

Sa pagdinig ng House committee on agriculture and food nitong Huwebes, Marso, 7 dinikdik ni House Deputy Majority Leader at ACT-CIS party-list Rep. Erwin Tulfo ang ahensiya matapos aminin ni NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco na hindi dumaan sa public bidding ang pagbebenta nito ng bigas sa mga negosyante.

Ipinaliwanag ni Bioco na ang "aging" o lumang bigas ay isang "regular function of disposing" ng NFA at exempted ito sa sa public bidding batay sa circular ng Commission on Audit (COA).

Inamin naman ni Bioco na ang mga ibinentang bigas ng NFA ay ipoproseso ng mga negosyante upang maging ligtas na kainin kapag ibinenta sa publiko.

"Sa tingin ko may plano talaga na i-hokus pokus ito, i-mekus-mekus itong mga stock na ito para maibenta sa mga private corporation," sabi ni Tulfo.

"Yon ang excuse mo kaya mo ibinenta ng P25

per kilo, as is, where is, kasi malapit nang mabulok kaya niyo ibinenta?" tanong ni Tulfo.

Nabatid na ang bili ng NFA sa bigas ay nasa P34 kada kilo.

Sagot ni Bioco, "Yes, because that's the maximum allowable price."

"Bakit hindi sa goyerno ibinenta bakit sa private corporation? Susmaryosep, November, December, ikot nang ikot ang House leadership naghahanap ng murang bigas. Ang tao nagugutom, napakamahal ng bigas, sa mga oras na 'yuon ang presyo ng bigas umaabot sa P70 (per kilo), meron pala kayong bigas na ganon. Bakit hindi n'yo na lang sinabihan ang goyerno na meron kayong bigas?" giit naman ni Tulfo.

"Talagang gumawa sila ng 'hokus-pokus' para magic-in ito. Akala makakalimutan," dagdag pa ng mambabatas.

Sinabi ni Tulfo na dapat ay inilaan na lamang ang bigas sa ibang ahensiya ng goyerno tulad ng Department of Social Welfare and Development, Bureau of Corrections, at Bureau of Jail Management and Penology.

"Bakit hindi n'yo po ipinasa sa mga government agencies, bakit sa private

corporations pa?" tanong ni Tulfo.

Sagot naman ni Bioco, "Ang hawak natin by July and August mga aging stocks, kahit na i-remilled natin at kung hindi sila sang-ayon sa quality, then hindi sila bibili sa atin."

Hindi naman masabi ni Bioco kung mayroong ahensiya na sinabihan ang NFA kaugnay ng bigas na kanilang ibebenta sa murang halaga.

"Wala po tayong letter directly," sabi ni Bioco.

Pero sinabi ng chairperson ng komite na si Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga na sumulat ang DSWD sa NFA upang mag-request ng bigas subalit hindi nila ito pinagbigyan.

"We have a copy that you rejected DSWD doon sa request nila," dagdag pa ni Enverga.

Samantala, hiniling ni Abang Lingkod party-list Rep. Joseph Stephen Paduano sa komite na imbitahan ang Office of the Ombudsman sa susunod na pagdinig.

Nauna ng sinuspendi ng Ombudsman si Bioco at 138 iba pang opisyal at empleyado ng NFA kaugnay ng pagbebenta ng 75,000 bag ng bigas sa mga pribadong trader sa halagang P93.75 milyon. (Billy Begas)





## PBBM napundi sa NFA bigas scam

KINATIGAN ni Pangulong "Bongbong" Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ang anim na buwang suspensiyon sa 139 opisyal ng National Food Authority (NFA) kaugnay sa maanomalyang pagbebenta ng imbak na bigas ng ahensiya sa ilang rice traders.

Sinabi ng pangulo na ang isyu sa NFA ay

hindi lamang umikot sa maanomalya at paluging pagbebenta ng bigas kundi pati na rin sa ginawang proseso ng walang pag-apruba ng NFA board at wala ring basbas mula sa Department of Agriculture at sa ilang miyembro ng gabinete.

Ang aksiyon aniya ng mga sangkot na opisyal ay patunay na binalewala nila ang mga proseso at ginawang shortcut para sa kanilang pansariling interes.

"So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have

been set out in the rules have been ignored," anang pangulo.

Kabilang sa mga sinuspinde ng Ombudsman ng anim na buwan ay si NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco at NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations John Roberto Hermano, kasama na ang 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers at 98 warehouse supervisors.

Ang suspension ng nabanggit na bilang ng mga NFA official ay isang paraan upang mapabilis ang imbestigasyon at walang magiging balakid sa pagkalap ng mga ebidensiya tungo sa mabilis na resulta at pagtukoy kung sino ang mga dapat na managot sa anomalya. (Aileen Taliping)



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## **PBBM pinaboran suspension ng 139 NFA officials**

May natuklasan pang mga bagong anomalya sa National Food Authority (NFA) kaya sinuspindi ang 139 opisyal at mga tauhan nito.

Sinabi ni Pangulong

Ferdinand Marcos Jr., ilang aksyon at hakbang ng mga opisyal ng NFA ang walang board-approval at walang nangyaring diskusyon na kasama at aprubado ng Department of Agriculture

(DA) at buong gabinete na lumabag o bumalewala sa mga tamang panuntunan o guidelines.

Nangangahulugan umano ito na nagsarili sa pagdedesisyon ang ilang opisyal

ng kagawaran.

Matatandaan na sinuspindi ng Office of the Ombudsman ang nasa 139 opisyal at tauhan ng NFA kabilang sina administrative director Roderico Bioco at assistant administrator for operations John Roberto Hermano kasama ang 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers at 98 warehouse supervisors matapos ang umano'y maanomalyang pagbebenta ng murang bigas sa mga pinaborang rice trader.

"So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," ayon pa sa Presidente. (Gemma Garcia)





# NFA chief chided over questioned rice sale

By Jester  
Manalastas

HOUSE Deputy Majority Leader and ACT-CIS Party-list Representative Erwin Tulfo lambasted and accused the National Food Authority (NFA) for alleged "mekus-mekus" or manipulating rice supplies.

The rice issue has led to the preventive suspension of its administrator and 138 other officials and employees of the agency.

During the Congressional hearing, Tulfo got irked and berated NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco after he admitted that the sale of rice was not through proper bidding. Tulfo also questioned Bioco over how he chose the companies to which the rice was sold.

Upon the instruction of Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, the House Committee on Food and Agriculture, chaired by Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga has conducted investigation on the alleged anomalous sale of government's rice buffer stocks.

"Sa tingin ko may plano talaga na i-hokus pokus ito, i-mekus-mekus itong mga

stock na ito para maibenta sa mga private corporations," Tulfo told the committee.

"Yun ang excuse mo kaya mo ibinentang P25 per kilo, as is, where is, kasi malapit nang mabulok kaya niyo ibinenta?" Tulfo asked Bioco to which he replied "Yes, because that's the maximum allowable price."

"Bakit hindi sa gobyerno ibinenta bakit sa private corporation? Susmaryosep, November, December, iko'tng iko'tang House leadership naghahanap ng murang bigas. Ang taonagu-

gutom, napakamahal ng bigas sa mga oras na yun ang presyo ng bigas umaabot sa P70 (per kilo), meron pala kayong bigas na ganun. Bakit hindi nyo na lang sinabihan ang gobyerno na meron kayong bigas?" Tulfo averred.

"Talagang gumawa sila ng 'hokus-pokus' paramagic-inito. Akala makakalimutan," Tulfo added.

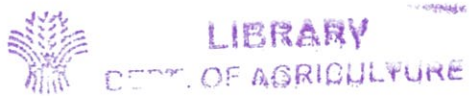
The congressman also assailed the Commission on Audit (COA) particularly the resident auditors of NFA for not doing their job and not closely monitoring the transactions in

the agency.

The COA representative reasoned out that they failed to monitor the warehouses as it was located in the regional offices of NFA and it was under the regional auditors.

Earlier, the Office of the Ombudsman placed under preventive suspension for six months NFA Administrator Bioco and 138 other officials and employees of the agency amid the ongoing investigation into the alleged anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks.





**PBBM BACKS SUSPENSION OF 139 NFA EXECS**

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. on Wednesday stood firm on the decision to suspend the officials of the National Food Authority (NFA) involved in the anomalous sale of rice.

President Marcos said the government was compelled to impose a "safe measure" in the NFA by suspending those not only involved in various anomalies but also those who committed the act in a "cavalier way."

In a recorded interview, President Marcos said the situation in the NFA does not only in-

volve anomalous sale of NFA rice but also some procedures within the agency that were undertaken without board approval and proper discussion with the NFA.

He said those transactions also took place without the approval of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and "with the rest of the Cabinet."

"So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the

cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," President Marcos said.

The Office of the Ombudsman suspended for six months NFA administrator Roderico Bioco and NFA assistant administrator for operations John Roberto Hermano along with 12 regional managers, 27 branch managers and 98 warehouse supervisors.

The suspension stemmed from the alleged "disadvantageous sale of rice buffer stocks."

PCO





## How package design and copy add to an heirloom product's appeal

**M**ama Sita is known for its array of delicious products, all evoking Filipino home-cooked or fiesta meals. Beyond being a pioneer in the industry and producing consistently good products, there's a reason they are top of mind in this category: good marketing.

This isn't a sponsored post. Though I've worked with the brand mentioned in the past, that was a long time ago and we haven't had any professional contact since. That said, I admire their marketing acumen in terms of popularizing Filipino sauces and ingredients, as well as their advocacy to preserve Filipino culinary traditions and its commitment to agricultural research.

The reason I decided to write about Mama Sita's marketing in this column begins with a box of rice. Now, boxed rice isn't a thing in the Philippines. We like our rice in sacks and bags, so that we can measure the grain ourselves, from single servings (there are rice cookers for one now) to kilos for a whole party. What we do have in boxes,

however, is almost deserts. These mix and bake/cook breads and pastries like pancakes and brownies ensure a near-consistent product every time. Mama Sita combined both to come up with Mama Sita's Heirloom Rice Champorado Porridge Kit, a pre-portioned serving of rice, cacao, and sugar that comes in a box, ready to cook.

Now, there are other instant champorados in the market, arguably easier to make, since all the ingredients are already mixed together, and all that needs to be done is to add water and heat.

But let's go back to this specific box of champorado. It isn't instant per se, because it contains the same ingredients used to make champorado from scratch: rice, tablea, and sugar. What makes it stand out is the experience one has making the dish.



**AVANT  
GARDENER**  
YVETTE TAN

First, there's the packaging: a brown cardboard box adorned with a simple, classically designed black white sticker that mentions what the product is; the Mama Sita logo the only thing in color. It implies traditional, homemade, classy, and comforting.

Next, there's provenance. Each kit comes with a small piece of paper that tells the customer that the rice is a variety called Minaangan sourced from Banaue, Hingnon, and Hungduan "IN THE TERRACED MOUNTAIN SLOPES OF IFUGAO (capitalizations theirs)" and that the cacao is "100 percent natural" from Mindanao. It also includes tasting and nutritional notes for the rice, part of which reads: "Its earthy, somewhat nutty flavor has a pleasant bite." It doesn't say where the sugar is sourced, however. It would have been nice if that was stated as well.

There's also preparation. The kit lets one literally make champorado from scratch, and the pre-portioned ingredients removes the need to measure and the worry of having extra ingredients lying around after. I liked that it came with sugar and that it was packed separately, allowing the eater to measure sweetness themselves (though I've been proven more than once that it's the perfect measurement). Newbie cooks will get a sense of satisfaction at having made something while expert cooks will be happy that there's not much to clean up.

Last, but not least, it's delicious. It's hard to mess up rice and chocolate, and I feel that that's what Mama Sita is banking on. Plus, rice, tablea, and sugar are three ingredients that don't spoil easily, which is

why they're the only ingredients listed on the box.

In short, this is a product that's easy to make, lasts long, is delicious, has cultural and nostalgic pull, and whose ingredients come, one assumes, from the towns that produced them and not through the faceless middlemen that make up most of our food system.

It's a great product (I can never say no to champorado, so I might be a little bit biased about this) and great marketing. It highlights local heirloom ingredients and supports local producers and conveys this tastefully (I can't stress this enough) through its packaging, design, and copy. If you're making it for yourself, even the cooking is part of the experience.

The Philippines has a lot of delicious, nutritious and interesting products that support local farms and produce. However, a lack of marketing, packaging, and copywriting knowhow can keep a great product from finding a wide audience. These elements are just as important as product research and development, since they're the first things customers will see and essentially is the ambassador of your product. One has to study the design and copy associated with their ideal client and include that in their product experience.

It's why this box of rice succeeds: It caters to the buyer who values culture and sustainability. Your product may have a different clientele, and it's important that your package design and copy reflect that.





## La Niña effects expected to be more pronounced toward late 2024

THE government weather service, known as PAGASA (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration), said on Thursday that rains associated with La Niña may become more pronounced towards the end of the year, even though the weather phenomenon's onset could come as early as June.

"We are seeing a higher possibility of La Niña to develop in June, but its effects may be seen during the later parts of the year," Nathaniel T. Servando, PAGASA administrator, said in a briefing.

Mr. Servando added that the likelihood of La Niña occurring is 55% in June, July, and August, triggering the issue of a La Niña Watch bulletin.

According to PAGASA, La Niña is characterized by "unusually cooler than average sea surface temperatures (SSTs) in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific (CEEP)."

He added that El Niño has started to weaken as it transitions to an ENSO-neutral (El Niño-Southern Oscillation) state in April, May, and June.

Weather conditions that are neither El Niño nor La Niña are considered to be ENSO-neutral.

"Despite the weakening of El Niño, we are expecting its effects to still be felt in the next few months," he said.

In an advisory, PAGASA said 25 provinces in Luzon and five in the Visayas have the potential to develop

drought conditions, while 22 may potentially experience dry spells. A further 15 may experience dry conditions.

"The warm and dry season will commence in March... The rainfall forecast for March shows that most parts of the country will likely experience way below to below-normal rainfall conditions," PAGASA said.

The effects of drought and dry conditions threaten agricultural production, with a follow-on impact on food security.

Agricultural damage resulting from El Niño has topped P1.06 billion, with Western Visayas hit hardest, according to a report by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

— **Adrian H. Halili**





ISA ang sardinas sa madalas na kainin ng mga Pinoy!

Bukod kasi sa mura, mas madali itong ihanda at kainin.

Pero tanong ng iba, ito ba'y healthy kainin?

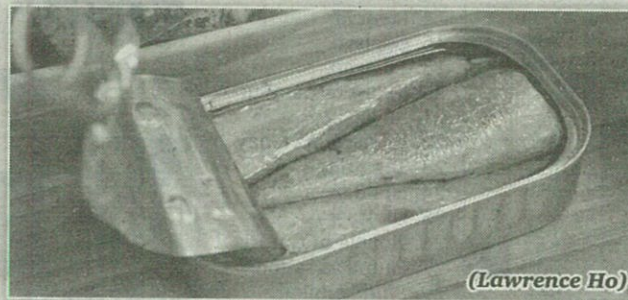
Ang canned sardines ay may kanya kanyang nutritional overview batay sa uri nito at kung paano ito iprinoseso.

Ayon sa U.S. Department of Agriculture database, ang isang serving ng average na sardinas na nabibili sa tindahan ay mayroong 200 calories, 22 grams ng protein, 13 grams ng fat, 0 grams ng carbohydrates, sugar at fiber at 250-350 milligrams ng sodium.

Mayaman din ang sardinas sa vitamin D, B12, calcium, phosphorus at selenium.

Nakakatulong din ang sardinas sa pagbabawas ng timbang dahil mayroon itong high protein content at nakakatulong para mas mabilis mabusog at pag-build ng muscle mass.

## NUTRITION EXPERT: SARDINAS MASUSTANSYA!



(Lawrence Ho)

"They are an oily fish, which are (often) canned in oil, which means they contain even more fat, but the fat in the sardines themselves (has) proven benefits," ayon kay Julia Zumpano, registered

dietitian sa Cleveland Clinic's Center for Human Nutrition

Sa katunayan, ang sardinas ay nasa listahan ng healthiest seafoods dahil mayroon itong omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and

DHA) na maganda para sa puso.

"Numerous studies have found that omega-3s help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease," pahayag naman ni France Largeman-Roth, isang registered dietitian nutritionist.

Healthy din ito para sa buto, kung saan kaya ng sardinas na magbigay ng 50% ng iyong daily calcium needs. "Omega-3s are promising for skin conditions like psoriasis, dermatitis and other-inflammatory conditions," dagdag pa ni Largeman-Roth.

At alam mo ba na ang sardinas ay pwede ring kainin ng mga aso na healthy din para sa kanilang puso, brain, at buto. (Natalia Antonio)



# Malaya Business Insight

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## Soybeans, corn steady

SINGAPORE- Chicago wheat slid for a third consecutive session on Thursday, with the market dropping to its lowest since August 2020 as fierce competition among exporters provided headwinds to prices.

Corn was largely unchanged, while soybeans ticked higher.

"There is a lot of wheat around from last year's crop and conditions are pretty favorable for northern hemisphere production later this year," said one Sydney-based trader.

The most-active wheat contract

on the Chicago Board Of Trade (CBOT) fell 0.2 percent to \$5.30 a bushel, as of 0240, after hitting its weakest since August 2020 at \$5.28-1/2 a bushel earlier in the day.

Corn was unchanged at \$4.28-3/4 a bushel and soybeans added 0.1 percent to \$11.49-1/2 a bushel.

Wheat prices came under renewed pressure after Algeria purchased at least 870,000 metric tons on Tuesday, mostly believed to be cheap wheat produced in the Black Sea region. - *Reuters*





## World wheat outlook, prices under pressure

BY KAREN BRAUN

CHICAGO, Illinois- Exactly two years ago, Chicago wheat futures stamped all-time highs after top exporter Russia invaded fellow supplier Ukraine, immediately throwing almost 30 percent of global wheat exports into question.

But on Wednesday, CBOT wheat slipped to its lowest level since August 2020, joining the ranks with corn and soybeans, which last week also notched their lowest prices since late 2020.

In theory, global supply outlooks for wheat are not necessarily bearish, especially compared with those for corn and soybeans, though this wheat storyline clearly remains repetitive and non-threatening in traders' eyes.

US Department of Agriculture estimates suggest 2023-24 global wheat ending stocks will decline for a fourth consecutive season to eight-year lows. Eleven-year lows are on the docket when excluding serial grain stockpiler China from the mix.

Isolating major wheat exporters, stocks-to-use, a measure of supply versus demand, is seen at a three-year low of 14.8 percent in 2023-24, down from 15.9 percent in the prior season. The recent 10-year average is about 16.9 percent.

For corn and soybeans, global stocks-to-use is pegged at 23 percent and 21 percent, respectively, marking four- and five-year highs.

The latest prognosis for wheat exporters is not much different from what USDA had projected for 2021-22 back in March 2022, roughly two weeks after the Rus-



Field of soft red winter wheat in the Chicago suburb of Naperville, Illinois. (Reuters Photo)

sian invasion. Predicted stocks-to-use of 14 percent at that time was down from 15 percent estimated for 2020-21 and scheduled to reach 14-year lows.

Instead, wheat exporter stocks-to-use in 2021-22 rose on the year to 15.4 percent, as skyrocketing prices likely choked off some demand in the second half of that year. Stocks-to-use rose again in the following year based on an unexpectedly solid Ukrainian export effort and a huge surge in Russian supplies.

This expanding trend is already happening for 2023-24, as the 14.8 percent stocks-to-use among major exporters is up from 13.5 percent predicted last September,

for example.

Global wheat prices have been under pressure for months due to abundant supplies in top exporter Russia. Russian wheat shipments last month reached record volumes for February, and export prices have tumbled about 16 percent since Feb. 1.

Refinitiv data shows benchmark Russian wheat export prices this week slipped below \$200 per metric ton (\$5.44 per bushel) for the first time since August 2020, marking the lowest early-March price since 2017.

Ukraine's program is also going well, and as of Wednesday, season-to-date wheat exports are up 6 percent from a year ago.

USDA is looking for a 12 percent annual decline in Ukraine's 2023-24 wheat shipments, so this could be up for revision on Friday in the agency's monthly supply and demand report.

CBOT wheat's settle on Wednesday of \$5.31 per bushel is the most-active contract's lowest for the date since 2020, when wheat closed around \$5.16. Speculators were relatively bullish wheat in early 2020, opposite to today's bearish views.

But funds' current net short in wheat is nowhere near as extreme as the ones in corn and beans, which is sensible based on the broad global supply picture for each crop. - Reuters