

**CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, MARCH 16, 2024**

**A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED**

**THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

**No Senate Cha-Cha before Holy Week**

**THE MANILA TIMES**

**Czech minister to lead business mission to PH**

**MANILA BULLETIN**

**Czech Republic eyeing robust trade ties with PH**

**PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER**

**Suspension of 23 NFA warehouse execs lifted**

**THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

**DA clarifies report on armyworm infestation**

**ABANTE TONITE**

**Czech Republic, 'Pinas pakner sa safeguard ng pagkain – BBM**

**PEOPLE'S JOURNAL**

**Czech agri officials coming next week**

**DA plans measures to boost local dairy milk production**

**82 Solar-powered pumps ready for irrigation**

**B. DA FAMILY**

**THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

**Czech Republic to supply Phl with military equipment**

**THE MANILA TIMES**

**Red tide still up in Mindanao, Visayas provinces**

**PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER**

**Joecon, an inspiring icon for agriculture**

**Isabela farmers face water rationing**

**THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

**Editorial: Dairy development**

**Rice inventory drops to 17-month low**

**Ombudsman lifts suspension order vs 23 NFA personnel**

**REMATE**

**Sobrang pangangisda patungo sa disyerto sa karagatan**

**ABANTE TONITE**

**Ombudsman niloko sa NFA scam listahan – Martires**

**Bantayan ang pondo ng NFA**

**PILIPINO STAR NGAYON**

**Patay, retirado, bodegero kasama sa sinuspindeng NFA employees**

**C. AGRI-RELATED STORY**

**THE MANILA TIMES**

**BoI harness PH cold chain for bangus industry**

**Dry spell damage to agro up P400M**

**THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

**Food for thought: Survival- the Ivatan way**

**PEOPLE'S JOURNAL**

**PH private sector sets trade visit to Malaysia for agri collab**

**D. FOREIGN STORY**

*No stories*



# No Senate Cha-cha before Holy Week

By CECILLE SUERTE FELIPE

**Despite the speedy approval by the House of Representatives of a resolution on Charter change, the Senate is taking its time and is unlikely to pass its version of the measure before the Holy Week break.**

Based on the Senate agenda and schedule for the last week of session, Sen. Sonny Angara's subcommittee on constitutional amendments has not set any hearing on Resolution of Both Houses No. 6 (RBH6) until the last session day on March 20. Congress' recess is set from March 23 to April 28.

The House approved Resolution of Both Houses No. 7 (RBH7) on second reading last Wednesday.

In Prague, both Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri and Speaker Martin Romualdez, who were part of President Marcos' delegation to the Czech Republic, said their chambers were on track to pass economic Cha-cha.

It was unclear, however, whether Zubiri and Romualdez were in agreement on the timeline for Charter change.

Romualdez posted on X a photo of him with Zubiri, Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo, Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. taken at Prague Castle, the Czech Republic's seat of government, shortly before the bilateral meeting there between President Marcos and Czech President Petr Pavel.

The state visit aims to strengthen "the bilateral cooperation and multilateral partnership between the two countries," Romualdez said.

A source said the Senate had appealed to the House to set the third and final approval of RBH7 before Congress' adjournment on May 25.

"Maybe the Senate did not want the House to pass the resolution way ahead of them

Turn to Page 4



# THE PHILIPPINE STAR

TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

Date: 16 MAR 2024 Page: 1 of 4



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## No Senate From Page 1

so they are asking if the House can, instead, approve RBH7 before the *sine die* adjournment," the source said.

But Zubiri said he had no clue as to who was making the appeal.

Angara's committee has so far conducted four public hearings on RBH6, on Feb 5, 12, 20 and March 5. At the hearings, the senators tackled the key elements of the proposal to amend specific economic provisions of the Constitution, particularly on public service, the education sector and advertising industry.

Legal luminaries, business executives and representatives from the education sector attended the first four public hearings.

RBH6 was supposed to counter the people's initiative, believed to be a ploy by the leadership of the House of Representatives to compel both houses of Congress to vote jointly on proposed changes in the 1987 Constitution.

Senators are against joint voting, as votes from the more than 300 congressmen would certainly overwhelm their 24-member votes.

The issue triggered a word war between the two chambers, prompting President Marcos to step in by directing their leaders to let the Senate take the lead in the Cha-cha drive.

### 'Likely'

A Cha-cha critic, Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman, said political amendments would likely follow amendments to economic provisions in the Constitution.

"We cannot really ascertain but many are suspecting that if we open our Constitution to economic Cha-cha, next to follow is political Cha-cha. You cannot control the agenda in a constituent assembly – and even in a constitutional convention," Lagman told reporters.

Lagman noted that when members of the two chambers meet, "we can no longer control their agenda."

"I am not saying we will come to that but there is a possibility that it is where we are going... The much-feared amendment of political provisions may happen then," he main-

tained at the Tapatan media forum.

The lawmaker reiterated that there is no need to amend the 37-year-old Charter.

"The lifting of economic provisions, or what they described as restrictive, is unnecessary. It is not imperative because our country has not done a conducive economic environment like addressing the ease of doing business, on the rampant corruption in the government and on the unpredictability of government policy, slow internet speed and high electricity rate," he added.

Lagman said the government should first address these problems before embarking on constitutional amendment.

But Iloilo Rep. Janette Garin said the proposed economic reforms should proceed, citing their "significant potential to improve the lives of Filipinos struggling in poverty."

Garin said economic amendment could serve as a "catalyst for national development," as she urged other lawmakers to prioritize the "interests of the Filipino people above all else."

"Let's allow Filipinos to uplift their lives because when that hap-

pens, we can sleep soundly. We can say we did our obligation to our people," she added.

Earlier, Sen. Cynthia Villar said "there's a chance" that seven senators, including herself and other allies of President Marcos, would vote against the proposed measure to amend certain economic provisions of the Constitution.

### Open mind

Despite concerns over a possible rejection of RBH6 by a majority of senators, Angara said he remains hopeful that his colleagues would keep an open mind and consider the opinions of experts.

"As for me, I'd like to think that the senators have an open mind, so, if they hear something good here, they might change their minds. But of course, we respect each senator's point of view. Each has its own point of view," Angara said before the start of his committee's hearing on March 5.

Angara assured critics that the proposed liberalization of education – as contained in RBH6 – is not targeting basic education but only higher

technical and vocational education.

The senator gave the assurance after Department of Education Assistant Secretary Francis Bringas expressed the department's opposition to the proposed amendments to Article 14, Section 4, Paragraph 2 of the Constitution.

"We already said the intention was not to open up basic education because of the importance of values formation and nationalism, among others," Angara said.

Meanwhile, various groups are set to hold a rally outside the House of Representatives on March 20 to protest Cha-cha.

The No to Cha-cha Network, a coalition of groups against Charter change, said it would step up protest actions in anticipation of the House of Representatives' approval of RBH7 on third and final reading anytime.

The coalition warned the public that RBH7 is just a ruse, stressing the agenda of lawmakers is to disregard the Senate and vote on their own to amend the Charter, particularly removing term limits.

– With Helen Flores, Sheila Crisostomo, Emmanuel Tupas



# The Manila Times®

Date: 16 MAR 2024 Page: B1 B2



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## CZECH MINISTER TO LEAD BUSINESS MISSION TO PH

**PRAGUE:** Czech President Petr Pavel will be sending a business delegation, led by Agriculture Minister Marek Výborný, to Manila next week with the aim of strengthening bilateral cooperation.

"Very soon our Minister of Agriculture shall visit the Philippines with a numerous delegation of our businessmen with specific, particular plans to offer," Pavel

said in a joint press conference after a bilateral meeting with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Thursday.

"We also have companies that are involved in defense industry, manufacturing, in farming and agriculture, science, technology, energy sector, power sector," he added. "Many of these businesses do have particular specific plans for the fu-

ture cooperation with the Philippines..."

Marcos is on a three-day state visit to the Czech Republic following an invitation from Pavel. The two nations marked 50 years of diplomatic relations last year.

In Manila, Výborný is scheduled to meet with Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. and lead a business forum in Makati City on March 21.

The Czech minister and his delegation will also visit the Davao region for a business forum. They will also visit Tagum Agricultural Development Co. Inc. in Panabo City, Davao del Norte.

The Czech Republic has provided the Philippines with assistance with regard to analyzing and improving the dairy value

► **Mission B2**

### ■ MISSION FROM B1

## CZECH MINISTER

chain in the country.

Under the Aid for Trade initiative, the National Dairy Authority (NDA)

was given funding in line with a five-year program to raise milk production in the country.

The NDA completed two projects: the Expert Assistance on the in-depth Analysis of the Supply Chain of the Philippine Dairy Industry undertaken in 2018; and the Strengthening Capacities of Dairy Farmers and Extension Workers project undertaken in 2019.

**CATHERINE S. VALENTE**





# Czech Republic eyeing robust trade ties with PH

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS

**P**RAGUE, Czech Republic — Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said the Czech Republic is interested in stronger economic and trade relations with the

Philippines and expressed readiness to support the country in various sectors such as agriculture and transportation.

Fiala expressed this during his bilateral meeting with President Marcos here on Thursday afternoon, March 14,

(Prague time).

In his remarks, Fiala conveyed to Marcos Czech Republic's readiness to support the Philippines in various sectors, such as agriculture, ►8



**BILATERAL MEETING** — President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala prepare for a bilateral meeting on Thursday, March 14, 2024, where they discussed economic and trade relations between the Philippines and the Czech Republic. (PPA)



Date: March 16, 2024 Page: 1 of 8



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## Czech Republic eyeing robust trade ties with PH 1◀

energy technology, transportation, civil aviation and aeronautics, and space technology.

He likewise reiterated to the President their strong commitment to the Philippines' economic development, saying Prague considers Manila as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We are interested in stronger economic and trade relations with your country. We can assist this diversification of your country's economic model," Fiala said. "I saw in Manila many possibilities for our future cooperation. We discussed cooperation, agriculture, defense, aviation, and energy."

Prime Minister Fiala visited Manila in April 2023 and met with President Marcos where they launched the book "Kaibigan-Přátelé: Czech-Philippine Cultural and Diplomatic Dialogue" in Malacañan Palace.

In response, President Marcos noted that their trips to their respective countries showed their vibrant bilateral ties and have borne fruit as they agreed to further explore more areas of cooperation that are beneficial to their people.

He also acknowledged Fiala's strong commitment to the Philippines and the Filipino people.

"We continue to pursue and explore the areas that we spoke about before. We, of course, talked about the defense and security, and, in that vein, we have just—the Armed Forces of the Philippines, as you know, is in the process of modernization of our capabilities and capacities," Marcos said.

"We continue to explore also in terms of agriculture, cybersecurity, which is something that we spoke about very briefly, but now we put a little bit more, put a bit more meat on the bones of that initial discussion that we have had," he added.

### Czech agri execs set PH visit

In terms of food security, Czech

Republic President Petr Pavel announced that Czech Republic agriculture officials will visit Manila next week to establish cooperation that would support the food security initiatives of the Philippines.

According to Pavel, Czech Agriculture Minister Marek Výborný will lead a delegation of businessmen to show interest in investing in agriculture and other key sectors.

Výborný's visit is in line with both countries' bid to expand cooperation with Czech Republic in terms of food security.

The Czech official and his delegation will be meeting with Philippine Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel and lead the business forum to be held in Makati on March 21.

The group will also visit Davao for a business forum and farm visit at the Tagum Agricultural Development Company, Inc. (Tadeco) in Davao the following day.

The Czech Republic is one of the Philippines' partners that provided assistance in analyzing and improving value chains in the Philippine dairy industry.

The Czech Aid-for-Trade granted the National Dairy Authority's (NDA) proposal to fund the technical exchange of experts. This initiative was in line with the DA's five-year program to raise the milk production in the country from one to 10 percent.

The NDA completed two projects in cooperation with the Czech Republic namely, the Expert Assistance on the in-depth Analysis of the Supply Chain of the Philippine Dairy Industry undertaken in 2018; and the Strengthening Capacities of Dairy Farmers and Extension Workers project undertaken in 2019.

The diplomatic relations between the Philippines and the Czech Republic were officially established on Oct. 5, 1973.



Date: 16 MAR 2024 Page: A1 & A3



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# SUSPENSION OF 23 NFA WAREHOUSE EXECS LIFTED

STORY BY KATHLEEN DE VILLA AND JORDEENE B. LAGARE

The Ombudsman heeds the recommendation of probers looking into the questionable sale of rice stocks in 2023. He clarifies that the lifting is not related to the petition filed by 108 suspended workers of the National Food Authority (NFA).

A3



Date: 16 MAR 2024

Page: A1 & A3



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## FROM A1

By Kathleen de Villa  
and Jordeene B. Lagare  
@Team\_Inquirer

Twenty-three warehouse supervisors of the National Food Authority (NFA) who are part of a group implicated in the questionable sale last year of rice buffer stocks may soon resume work at the agency after their six-month preventive suspension was revoked by the Office of the Ombudsman.

"After a probe was conducted by our investigators, they recommended that the preventive suspension be lifted," Ombudsman Samuel Martires told the Inquirer in a telephone on Friday.

Martires denied that the lifting was due to the alleged errors in the list of respondents, such as the inclusion of dead and retired employees as well as a worker on study leave.

"No errors, there are no errors [in the list]," he said.

Martires also noted that the reversal of the suspension order against the 23 NFA workers had

"nothing to do with the (motion for reconsideration)" filed by 108 employees in the Office of the Ombudsman on Thursday.

The 23 employees, according to the Ombudsman, were assigned to NFA warehouses in Metro Manila, in the provinces of Antique and Iloilo, as well as in Cabanatuan City in Nueva Ecija province.

Asked whether more suspensions are expected to be set aside in the coming days, Martires said: "Yes. Hopefully, there will be more that will be recommended by the investigators."

### Only source of income

It remains unclear whether the 23 NFA workers given relief were among the 108 petitioners who asked the Office of the Ombudsman to set aside the suspension order, for fear that they would lose their only source of income for half a year.

In a motion filed by lawyers Dino de Leon and Raphael Rayco, the petitioners, mostly warehouse staff and some managers, said they should not be held accountable for the allegedly anomalous transactions with private traders. These deals involved the sale of 75,000 bags



Samuel Martires

of supposedly "deteriorating or aging" milled rice at low prices, and without going through public bidding.

The NFA employees said they were just exercising "ministerial" tasks and did not possess discretionary powers on the processing of rice stocks.

"The affected (NFA) employees are deeply saddened by the undue haste by which the Office of the Ombudsman carried out its preventive suspension without even substantiating the alleged involvement of each concerned employee," said De Leon in an earlier statement.

According to Rayco, the petition was made for the NFA workers who, unlike the sus-

## We want to stabilize the situation at the NFA following the events of last week

Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.  
Agriculture Secretary

pended high-ranking officials, lost their source of livelihood as they would serve the six-month suspension without pay.

The lawyers also pointed out what they described as glaring errors in the suspension order, which bore "wrong names and designations" of respondents, aside from the inclusion of employees no longer with the NFA.

The Inquirer on Friday tried to reach De Leon for confirmation on whether his clients had received the order lifting their suspension, but he had yet to reply at past 7 p.m.

An initial 139 NFA officials

and employees, including NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco, were the subjects of the March 4 suspension order handed down by the Office of the Ombudsman after it found "sufficient grounds" to implicate them in the allegedly anomalous sale of deteriorating milled rice worth P93.75 million.

A week later, two more officials—recently named NFA Officer in Charge (OIC) Piolito Santos and acting department manager for operation and coordination Jonathan Yazon—were also suspended.

Although the rice stocks were sold for P25 a kilo, Bioco had said the food agency was authorized to dispose of aging stocks without the NFA Council's approval or public bidding under existing rules.

### 'Good news'

The Department of Agriculture (DA) on Friday said it had yet to receive a copy of the order lifting the suspension of the 23 NFA personnel, but it noted that the decision would help the families of the concerned employees.

On the government television program "Bagong Pilipinas

Ngayon," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa confirmed that Harold Cuartero, the NFA assistant branch manager in Batangas province, already received the said order.

"We are now waiting for the order lifting the suspension of more than 20 NFA personnel. This is good news for these employees because they were suspended without pay," De Mesa, also the DA's spokesperson, said.

"This will help them provide for their families again," he added.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. again assumed the position of acting NFA chief until the NFA Council, which will convene on Monday, appoints a new OIC administrator to replace Santos.

DA Director Larry Lacson was also named OIC deputy administrator of the food agency.

"We want to stabilize the situation at the NFA following the events of last week," Tiu Laurel said.

"We want to help NFA employees during these challenging times to continue to provide uninterrupted service, especially during this harvest season," he added. **INQ**





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## DA clarifies report on armyworm infestation

Only 18 hectares of onion plantations in the country have been damaged due to armyworm or *harabas* infestation, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

At the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, DA Assistant Secretary and spokesman Arnel de Mesa said the number of affected plantations is low compared to the 10,300 hectares of onion plantations in Central Luzon.

"About 2,400 hectares were partially damaged with still a chance

of recovery," De Mesa said. "Based on our data, the magnitude of damage is not yet big, but we continue to monitor, and our Regional Crop Protection Center is coordinating with our onion farmers to ensure assistance to prevent the spread of *harabas*."

Farmers' group Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) president Danilo Fausto had earlier said the country might have to import up to 60,000 metric tons of onions as 45 percent

of plantations are affected by armyworm infestations.

However, De Mesa said importation is not being considered at this time.

"Peak harvest is ongoing until April, so we will await the total harvest season before any recommendation to Secretary (Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.) whether there is a need to import or not," De Mesa said.

The total land area planted with onion has increased by 40 percent, he said.

The retail price of red onions dropped by P20 per kilo, to P80 per kilo compared to P100 per kilo last week.

"We will coordinate with Mr. Danny Fausto and the entire PCAFI to make sure, as their recommendation before was not to import, as many areas were planted to onions," De Mesa said.

Fausto said PCAFI had earlier requested the DA to suspend the importation of onions until July.

— Bella Cariaso



### Czech Republic, 'Pinas pakner sa seguridad ng pagkain - BBM

Nakatakdang bumisita sa Pilipinas sa susunod na linggo ang agriculture minister ng Czech Republic na si Marek Výborný at ang delegasyon nito para sa pagtatatag ng kooperasyon na susuporta sa mga inisyatiba sa seguridad ng pagkain sa bansa.

Ang pagbisita ay kaugnay ng hangarin ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. na palawakin ang kooperasyon sa Czech Republic sa aspekto ng food security.

Sa joint press conference ng Pangulo at ni Czech President Petr Pavel, inanunsiyo ang pagpapadala ng mga opisyal naturang bansa sa Pilipinas para tingnan ang mga potensiyal na maaaring paglagakan ng puhunan sa agrikultura at iba pang pangunahing sektor.

"Very soon our Minister of Agriculture shall visit the Philippines with a numerous

delegation of our businessmen with specific, particular plans to offer," ani Pavel.

Makikipagpulong si Minister Výborný kay Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. at magkakaroon ng business forum na gagawin sa Makati City sa Marso 21.

Bibisita rin ang grupo sa Davao City para sa isa pang business forum at magkakaroon ng farm visit sa Tagum Agricultural Development Company Inc. (Tadeco).

Sinabi ng Czech president na mayroon din silang mga kompanya sa defense industry, manufacturing, farming and agriculture, science, technology, energy sector, power sector at marami sa mga negosyong nabanggit ay mayroong mga plano para sa kooperasyon sa Pilipinas. (Aileen Taliping/Prince Golez)





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## Czech agri officials coming next week

CZECH Agriculture Minister Marek Výborný is set to visit Manila next week eyeing to establish cooperation that would support the food security initiatives of the Philippines.

The visit is in line with President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s bid to expand cooperation with Czech Republic in terms of food security.

In a joint press conference, Czech President Petr Pavel said they will bring with them a delegation of businessmen to show interest in investing in agriculture and other key

sectors.

"Very soon our Minister of Agriculture shall visit the Philippines with a numerous delegation of our businessmen with specific, particular plans to offer," Pavel said.

"We also have companies that are involved in defense industry, manufacturing, in farming and agriculture, science, technology, energy sector, power sector, many of these businesses do have a particular specific plans for the future cooperation with the Philippines come to part," he added.

Minister Výborný will be meeting with Philippines' Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel and lead the business forum to be held in Makati on March 21.

The group will also be visiting Davao for a business forum and farm visit at the Tagum Agricultural Development Company, Inc. (Tadeco) in Davao the following day.

The Czech Republic was one of the Philippines' partner who provided assistance in analyzing and improving value chains in the Philippine dairy industry.





## **DA plans measures to boost local dairy milk production**

**THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has considered seeking the support of local milk processors to bolster investment in the industry and increase dairy cattle population.**

According to Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr., plans have already been

drawn up as part of the target to significantly raise local dairy milk production that would invite trade and businesses.

Laurel Jr. met last week officials of the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc. (PCAFI) where they discussed plans to re-

view Republic Act 7884 or the National Dairy Development Act of 1995, particularly a provision requiring commercial milk processors and domestic dairy cooperatives to agree on the volume of locally produced milk that will be absorbed by the commercial sector.





# 82 solar-powered pumps ready for irrigation

By Joel dela Torre

THE National Irrigation Administration (NIA) has completed a total of 82 solar power-driven pump (irrigation) projects that will provide reliable water supply to 866 hectares of agricultural land in the country.

According to NIA Administrator Eduardo Guillen, the construction of the 82 pumps was part of the 150 potential irrigation sites for solar power-driven units amounting

to P1,654,583,000 for calendar year 2023.

As of December 2023, said (82) projects worth P667,957,000 have been completed and are benefiting 1,061 farmers and their families.

Guillen pointed out the need for NIA to harness the potential benefits of renewable energy sources in providing irrigation services to help address the depleting water supply as part of President Marcos Jr.'s instruction to in-

stitute measures against the El Nino phenomenon.

"Through solar power-driven pump irrigation projects, NIA sees that solar irrigation projects can augment the decreasing irrigation water supply from dams and reservoirs during this phenomenon," Guillen stressed.

This innovative technology, he added, can also be used in areas where the construction of dams may not be feasible even as in-

stalling more solar power-driven pump irrigation projects can aid Filipino farmers to boost their harvests.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Laurel, Jr. even emphasized that solar-powered irrigation was among the measures identified to mitigate the effects of El Niño.

In the Ilocos Region, the San Ildefonso Solar Pump Irrigation Project located in Arnay, San Ildefonso, Ilocos Sur was completed in December 2023



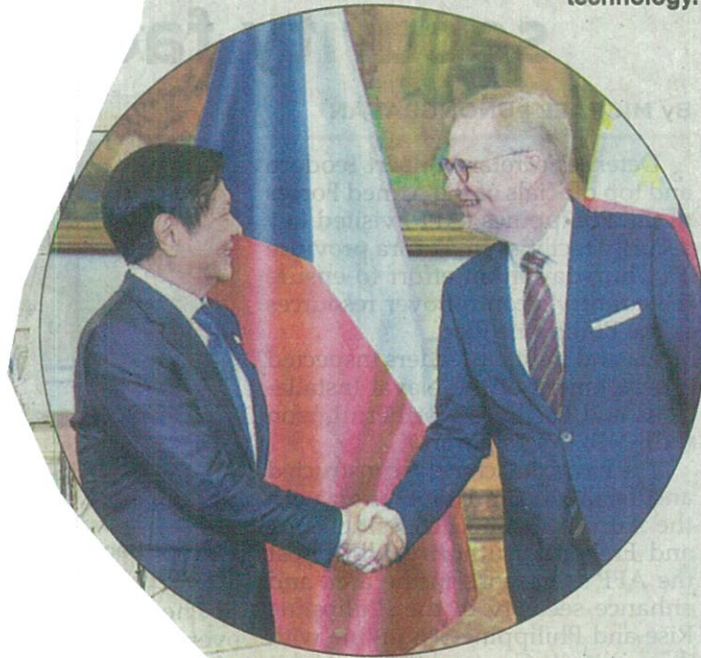
Date: 11 6 MAR 2024

Page: 1 and 4



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President Marcos, Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri, Speaker Martin Romualdez and Cabinet officials walk from the Czech Senate to the Chamber of Deputies for a meeting with the chamber speaker in Prague the other day. Inset shows President Marcos with Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, who expressed readiness to support the Philippines in various sectors including agriculture, energy technology, transportation, civil aviation and space technology.



## Czech Republic to supply Phl with military equipment

By HELEN FLORES

PRAGUE – The Czech Republic is ready to supply the Philippines with the latest defense technology and equipment to support its ongoing military modernization program, Prime Minister Petr Fiala told President Marcos.

During the two leaders' bilateral meeting here on Thursday, Fiala assured Marcos of support for the Philippines' efforts to boost the country's defense amid rising tensions in the West Philippine Sea.

Fiala said Czech companies "are very interested" in helping in

Turn to Page 4





## Czech From Page 1

the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Marcos, for his part, said the Czech government's assistance comes at a time when the country is in the process of strengthening the capabilities and the capacities of its military.

He told Fiala of the Re-Horizon Phase 3 of the Revised AFP Modernization Program, which involves the acquisition of more ships, aircraft and radar systems mainly for boosting the military's archipelagic defense capabilities.

"The Czech Republic has always been active as a source of equipment for the Philippines. And so, we come again to Czech Republic and offer the partnership with the Czech Republic and the Philippines," Marcos said.

"We invite the Czech defense companies, defense industry for them to submit proposals and to once again participate... to supply the Philippines' future defense capability requirement," the Chief Executive said.

Fiala said he acknowledged the Philippines as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We are interested in stron-

ger economic and trade with your country. We can assist this diversification of your country's economic model," the prime minister said.

"And I saw in Manila many possibilities for our future cooperation. We discussed cooperation, agriculture, defense, aviation and energy," he said.

At a joint press briefing with Marcos on Thursday, Czech President Petr Pavel also assured the Philippine leader of his country's commitment to assist in the AFP modernization.

"The Czech Republic has had a long tradition when it comes to defense industry. We have a lot to offer," Pavel said when asked about the kind of cooperation the Philippines and the Czech Republic are exploring in defending international law, particularly in the South China Sea.

### Czech agri exec

Also at the briefing held at the Octagon Hall of the Prague Castle on Thursday, Pavel announced that his country's agriculture minister Marek Výborný and a delegation of businessmen are set to visit the Philippines next week with "specific plans" to expand cooperation in the area of food security.

"Very soon our minister of agriculture shall visit the Philippines with a numerous delegation of our businessmen with specific, particular plans to offer," Pavel said.

"We also have companies that are involved in defense industry, manufacturing, in farming and agriculture, science, technology, energy sector, power sector, many of these businesses do have particular specific plans for the future cooperation with the Philippines," he added.

Výborný will meet with Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. and lead a business forum to be held in Makati City on March 21.

The group will also visit Davao for a business forum and farm visit at the Tagum Agricultural Development Co. Inc., which is located in Davao.

The Czech Republic has provided the Philippines with assistance in analyzing and improving value chains in its dairy industry.

According to the Presidential Communications Office, the Czech Aid-for-Trade granted the National Dairy Authority (NDA)'s proposal to fund the technical exchange of experts. This initiative was in line with the DA's five-year program to raise milk production in the country from one to

10 percent.

The NDA completed two projects in cooperation with the Czech Republic – the Expert Assistance on the in-depth Analysis of the Supply Chain of the Philippine Dairy Industry conducted in 2018 and the Strengthening Capacities of Dairy Farmers and Extension Workers project undertaken in 2019.

Marcos said he also tackled with his Czech counterpart the two countries' potential in increasing bilateral trade.

"I also highlighted to the President, the Philippines' remarkable economic performance, making it an attractive destination for Czech investments in the areas of IT-BPM (information technology-business process management), in electronics, manufacturing, food and agriculture and automotive/EV manufacturing, amongst others," Marcos said.

Also on Thursday, Marcos and Pavel witnessed the signing of the Joint Communiqué on Labor Consultations Mechanism, which guarantees greater protection for Filipinos working in the Czech Republic.

The European nation is increasing its quota for workforce coming from the Philippines starting in May.

Department of Migrant

Workers officer-in-charge Hans Leo Caddac and Czech Republic's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs signed the joint communiqué.

"We are ready to cooperate in ensuring the orderly deployment of Filipinos to your country, in accordance with both Czech and Philippine laws," Marcos said at their joint press conference.

As of December last year, there were 7,026 Filipinos in the Czech Republic based on data from the Czech Ministry of Interior.

The Filipino workers are engaged in the processing industry, automotive, repairs of appliances, manufacturing, IT communications, real estate, health/wellness and household service work.

Currently, Prague hosts the highest number of Filipinos in the Czech Republic with 1,511, followed by South Moravia with 1,242 and Central Bohemia, 905.

"I took note of the Czech Republic's announcement that you have increased the quota for Filipino workers from 5,500 to almost double that from January 2024 to 10,300 per year starting in May of 2024," Marcos said.

Pavel said the labor market in the Czech Republic suffers from shortage.

"The Philippines ranked among the top countries that send to us (workers) where we have topped qualified, highly skilled workers," Pavel said.

### Phi-EU free trade

Meanwhile, at the Philippine-Czech business forum here on Friday, President Marcos pushed for the resumption of negotiations for a free trade agreement between the Philippines and the European Union (EU), saying it would encourage more investments to the country.

"We believe that the resumption of these negotiations will be a big step in furthering our trade relations, with the end view to establish a stable, predictable and enabling business environment that promotes inclusive and sustainable growth and development," he said.

Negotiations for the Philippines-EU trade and investment agreement were launched on Dec. 22, 2015 followed by the second negotiations in February 2017.

The negotiations had since been put on hold until July 2023 while the EU and the Philippines announced their intention to begin technical discussions with a view to potentially resuming negotiations.





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## Red tide still up in Mindanao, Visayas provinces

**ZAMBOANGA CITY:** The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) renewed its public warning on Friday, March 15, that all types of shellfish and Acetes, a genus of small shrimp that resemble krill, gathered from two provinces in Mindanao are not safe for human consumption.

It said Dumanquilas Bay in

Zamboanga del Sur and the coastal waters of San Benito in Surigao del Norte are still positive for paralytic shellfish poison (PSP) or toxic red tide that is beyond the regulatory limit.

The BFAR said the coastal waters of Milagros in Masbate, coastal waters of Dauis and Tagbilaran City in Bohol, San Pedro Bay in Samar, and Matari-

nao Bay in Eastern Samar in the Visayas are also positive for PSP.

"All types of shellfish and Acetes sp. or alamang gathered from the areas shown above are not safe for human consumption," it said, adding fish, squids, shrimps, and crabs are safe for human consumption provided that they are fresh and washed thoroughly, and

internal organs such as gills and intestines are removed before cooking.

The BFAR first issued the PSP warning in December 2023.

Toxic red tide is caused by harmful algal blooms, which can lead to severe health problems when shellfish and other seafood are contaminated.

Harmful algal blooms occur

when colonies of algae — plant-like organisms that live in the sea and freshwater — grow out of control while producing toxic or harmful effects on people, fish, shellfish, marine mammals, and birds. The human illnesses caused by harmful algal blooms, though rare, can be debilitating or even fatal.

**AL JACINTO**





## Joecon, an inspiring icon for agriculture

### COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

**J**ose Concepcion, Jr. (Joecon), a true icon, should continue to inspire us to action.

At his funeral mass last March 11, the presiding priest said Joecon could be described as a national hero, and even a saint. What is clear is that Joecon definitely embodies what an icon is: "A person widely admired, especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere."

Joecon operated in many spheres. In the book "Joecon's Journey" by Joey Concepcion, Jaime Zobel de Ayala, Sr. said: "How much can one give to the cause of country, to lasting peace, and good governance? I believe in terms of Joe's life, the answers to these questions come in very few words: infinitely and without reservation."

#### Agriculture connection

Joecon loved agriculture. He took it as a course at the Arane-ta Institute of Agriculture and then went on into food processing, leading RFM Corporation to become one of the most successful food companies in the Philippines.

Having served as Joecon's undersecretary at the Department of Trade and Industry (before moving on to other positions at the Department

of Agriculture and the Office of the President, I immediately helped organize the Alyansa Agrikultura (AA). This was to get different agriculture sector organizations to work together and have a common voice.

When Joecon learned of this, his was only one of two corporations that helped sponsor AA's first initiative.

Here are four of Joecon's views, which should inspire us in agriculture:

1. "Light a candle," Joecon often said. "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

He organized National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel), a group that went beyond complaining and worked for a truly honest and clean elections. Despite all odds and during the most difficult of times, it succeeded.

In agriculture, we complain about smuggling and corruption. In two years, smuggling more than doubled from P500 million to P1.2 trillion.

Corruption was evident when the Commission on Audit

reported that for three successive years, from 2020 to 2022, the Department of Agriculture (DA) had one-third of the budget wasted to unliquidated and unexplained expenses. Fortunately, farmers and fisherfolk have found a new candle lit by the current leadership. Together with the DA, we must now take action in fighting this twin scourge.

2. "The Filipino can." Joecon was a nationalist, who believed our people can perform at global levels. He showed that the Filipino is the best there is by taking a pivotal role in mobilizing our people to peacefully restore democracy.

This inspired similar peaceful movements in Taiwan, South Korea, East Germany and many Soviet bloc countries.

The Filipino farmer can, in fact, regain its former prominent role in the region. It should follow Joecon's advocacy of pushing for government intervention. He specifically identified credit and financing, where less than 15 percent of our loanable funds go to agriculture. The Filipino farmer can, but he must get the necessary government support to succeed.

3. "Expect-inspect." This is the management mantra Joecon emphasized. If we "expect" but do not "inspect" what actually happens, we often fail. This is the "kulit" (persistent follow-up)

management style that was largely responsible for the impressive increase in investment commitments from P3 billion to more than P400 billion in three years under Joecon's watch.

In agriculture, we should likewise be incessant and inspect government commitments. We must demand transparency and accountability.

4. "God-centered." Joecon always had God at the center of his life. When confronted with disappointment and failure, Joecon would ask us to pray and not give up. He emulated Nobel Prize winner Mother Teresa, who said: "God did not ask us to be successful. He asked us to be faithful."

Like Joecon, we must be God-centered and stay faithful to our agriculture mission, no matter the failures we encounter.

Last March 11, his son Joey wrote: "My dad lit the candle. I try and honor him by making sure the candle never goes out." We, especially in agriculture, must now do the same. **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](mailto:agriwatch_phil@yahoo.com)





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# Isabela farmers face water rationing

**Cut will spare standing crops but in May, only around 60,000 of 90,000 hectares serviced by Magat Dam can be irrigated as drought persists, says NIA**

By Villamor Visaya Jr.  
@VillVisayaJrINQ

CITY OF ILAGAN—The National Irrigation Administration–Magat River Integrated Irrigation System (NIA-MARIIS) is set to reduce the water supply to thousands of hectares of farms in Isabela province for the next cropping season due to severe drought conditions, forcing the agency to implement rationing.

Gileu Michael Dimoloy, NIA-MARIIS Department Manager, cited the anticipated drop in water levels at Magat Dam amid the El Niño weather phenomenon for the reduced irrigation.

As of Friday, data from NIA-MARIIS showed that the dam's water level stood at 171.97 meters above sea level, which

was way below the normal high water level of 193 masl.

The receding dam elevation was due to the lack of rainfall over the watershed, prompting the dam administrator to end the irrigation supply on Friday but without a significant impact on local farms, Dimoloy told the Inquirer.

"So far, the suspended irrigation did not affect palay (rice) farmers as almost all of them have already planted or harvested their farms, as per our monitoring," he added.

Dimoloy said the planned reduced water allocation for farms would mean the irrigation agency could save water for the next cropping season in May, targeting to irrigate 60,000 hectares out of the usual 90,000 ha of rice farms in the

provinces of Isabela, Cagayan and some areas in Quirino.

## Solar pumps

Government initiatives such as installing solar pump irrigation projects were carried out to alleviate the impact of drought on agricultural productivity around the dam area like Isabela and Cagayan provinces.

At least 10 of such projects have been implemented in Isabela and Cagayan this year, with the most recent being in Ballesteros, Aurora, Isabela, costing P3.36 million and aimed at supporting 6.69-ha rice farms.

Dimoloy emphasized that these solar power pumps would enhance irrigation services and are part of the government's goals of rural development, agricultural

modernization and improved agricultural productivity, ensuring food sufficiency.

He said the solar pump irrigation projects would help cushion the impact of drought on farms.

According to Dimoloy, the retrofitting efforts at the 42-year-old dam are also ongoing to ensure uninterrupted irrigation services and hydro-electric power supply.

But despite the government promises of assistance, farmers like Roland Bravo, 46, and Reynaldo Paguirigan, 56, expressed concerns over the lack of rainfall and support reaching drought-affected areas.

Both complained that their rice farms have started to dry up due to the extreme heat experienced in the province. INQ





## **EDITORIAL**

# **Dairy development**

Apart from rice, the country's staple, there's a food item that needs a production boost: milk. The highly nutritious food is needed especially during childhood to promote physical and mental development. Malnourishment and undernourishment lead to stunting – a persistent problem in this country where millions live below the poverty line. Stunting retards learning, which impacts all other aspects of human development well into adulthood.

Milk, particularly baby formula, however, is a luxury for impoverished families. Desperate parents have resorted to shoplifting, prompting many retailers to place baby formula on locked shelves or behind point-of-sale counters to deter thievery. Even locally produced fortified milk, formulated for the different stages of child growth, is heavily dependent on imported milk ingredients. A supplemental feeding program is being implemented in the early stages of basic education in public schools, but the fortified milk in tetra pack remains inadequate for proper child nutrition.

The country is producing only one percent of its milk requirements, despite efforts to boost the domestic dairy industry for the past half-decade. Recently, the **National Dairy Administration** reported that milk imports dipped slightly in 2023, to 98 percent of the country's needs from 99 percent, as domestic production inched up.

This was contradicted by the head of the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. and the Dairy Confederation of the Philippines, which reported that total domestic milk production remained below one percent. Industry players are urging the government to implement Republic Act 7884, the Dairy Development Act. Among other things, RA 7884 requires multinational companies to source their milk requirements from domestic producers.

Local milk production, however, may not be able to meet the companies' requirements. If this is the case, the dairy producers' groups want the companies to set up dairy farms in the Philippines. The government has a modest target of producing locally five percent of the national milk requirement by 2028. Part of the program is setting up at least one "dairy zone" in every island region.

This will require a significant increase in funding for programs in dairy development. The government can seek financial and technical assistance from milk-producing countries, starting with the world's biggest milk exporter, New Zealand, where over a thousand Filipinos are now employed in the dairy industry. Considering the importance of milk in child development and overall nutrition, apart from the many other uses of milk in the food industry, domestic dairy production needs greater attention from the government.





## Rice inventory drops to 17-month low

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The country's rice stocks in February fell to their lowest level in more than a year despite higher imports recorded at the start of the year.

In its latest report, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said total rice inventory as of Feb. 1 stood at 1.51 million metric tons, slightly lower than the 1.52 million MT recorded in the same period last year.

The rice inventory last month was the lowest in 17 months or since the 1.45 million MT recorded in September 2022, PSA data showed.

"Month-on-month, the volume of rice stocks inventory recorded a decrement of 25.5 percent from the previous month's inventory of 2.03 million metric tons," the PSA also said.

The PSA said more than half of the recorded rice stocks were from the commercial sector while 45.3 percent were from the households. The National Food Authority (NFA) accounted for only 3.1 percent of the country's total rice inventory as of Feb. 1.

Commercial rice stocks expanded by nearly 44 percent year-on-year to 778,890 MT from 541,210 MT while household stocks declined by 21.9 percent to 685,200 MT from 877,030 MT last year.

Meanwhile, NFA stocks, which are

used for calamity purposes, plunged by more than half on an annual basis to 46,890 MT from last year's 104,790 MT.

"In comparison to the January 2024 rice stocks levels, month-on-month decreases were noted from the households by 31.5 percent, from the commercial establishments by 20.4 percent and from NFA depositories by 3.7 percent," the PSA said.

Rice imports in January rose by 70 percent year-on-year to 427,985.8 MT from 252,474.664 MT, based on Bureau of Plant Industry data.

In the same report, the PSA said nationwide corn stocks as of Feb. 1 expanded by 34.2 percent on an annual basis to 491,770 MT from 366,400 MT.

"Corn stocks inventory exhibited a decrement of 17.7 percent relative to its previous month's inventory level of 597.62 thousand metric tons," the PSA added.

The PSA added that the bulk or about 90 percent of the country's corn inventory during the reference period were from the commercial sector while the remaining volume were from households.

Commercial corn inventory stood at 440,350 MT, 51.2 percent over the 291,280 MT recorded in February last year.

Meanwhile, household corn stocks declined by 31.5 percent year-on-year to 51,420 MT from 75,120 MT.





## Ombudsman lifts suspension order vs 23 NFA personnel

By **ELIZABETH MARCELO**

The Office of the Ombudsman has lifted the suspension order against 23 of the 141 National Food Authority (NFA) officials and employees who are facing investigation in connection with the allegedly anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks to private traders.

Ombudsman Samuel Martires confirmed yesterday that his office lifted the six-month preventive suspension of 23 warehouse supervisors upon the recommendation of his field investigators.

Martires, however, was quick to clarify that the supervisors are still included as respondents in the ombudsman's ongoing investigation.

He said the investigators have yet to look into the "merits of the case" or the specific participation of each of the respondent NFA officials.

"No, (the lifting of suspension was) not in terms of their involve-

ment. We are saying that there is no need to continue the suspension of these employees because we already gathered the documents from them," Martires said.

Martires could not immediately furnish the reporters a copy of the order lifting the suspension of 23 NFA officials, but said that they were all warehouse supervisors, mostly assigned in Iloilo, Antique and Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija.

He also maintained that the names of the NFA officials and employees placed under preventive suspension were just based on the matrix submitted to the ombudsman by the office of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

"There may be some people who want to sabotage Secretary Laurel. He must investigate them," he added, reacting to reports that some of the NFA officials and employees ordered preventively suspended were already dead or had retired years ago.

"The NFA is not fooling us, they are fooling Secretary Laurel. Why? Are they afraid that Secretary Laurel might discover something? From what I know, the scope of the investigation of Secretary Laurel's office is from 2019 to present," Martires said.

In a radio interview, Martires confirmed that of the 141 suspended NFA officials and personnel, 23 of them can return to work after their suspension was lifted.

With the latest order of Martires, only 118 NFA officials and employees remain suspended.

Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture lauded the decision of the ombudsman to lift the suspension against 23 NFA officials.

Agriculture spokesman Arnel de Mesa confirmed that the DA has received a copy of the order lifting the suspension against NFA Batangas branch manager Harold Cuartero, adding that the agency is awaiting the copy pertaining to the 22 others.

Laurel has said that the resolution of cases against the officials and employees of the NFA must be hastened.

It was on March 4 when the ombudsman ordered the six-month preventive suspension of NFA administrator Roderico Bioco, assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano and 137 other NFA officials and employees facing administrative charges of grave misconduct, gross neglect of duty and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service.

A week later, the ombudsman also ordered the six-month preventive suspension of newly appointed NFA officer-in-charge administrator Piolito Santos and acting department manager for operations and coordination Jonathan Yazon as they were added as respondents in the administrative charges.

The charges stemmed from the alleged illegal sale of 75,000 bags of NFA rice, which was part of the

government's buffer stocks, to private traders G4 Rice Mill San Miguel Corp. and NBK San Pedro Rice Mill for a total of P93.75 million without the approval of the NFA Council.

Under Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law, the government is mandated to purchase from local farmers around 300,000 metric tons of rice in order to have a year-round national buffer stock for distribution in times of calamities and emergency situations.

During a hearing at the House committee on agriculture last week, it was also revealed that the rice buffer stocks were sold to the private traders for P25 per kilogram even if the market price was at P70 per kilogram.

On Thursday, several officials and employees of the NFA trooped to the main office of the ombudsman in Quezon City to demand the early resolution of the case.

— With Bella Cariaso





## Sobrang pangingsda patungo sa disyerto sa karagatan

IBINABALA kahapon ni Senador Cynthia Villar na maaaring magbunga ang sobra-sobrang pangingsda sa karagatan.

Disyerto sa karagatan ang kawalan na ng mahuhuli na magaganap umano sa 2050 kung hindi marerendahan ang sobra-sobrang pangingsda mula ngayon.

Ayon sa rekord ng Philippine Statistics Authority, kumonti umano ang huli sa 4.26 milyong tonelada noong 2023 kumpara sa 4.34M noong 2022 sa commercial at municipal fishing at tanging ang domestic aquaculture gaya ng pag-aalaga sa mga fishpond any may paglaki ng produksyon.

Sinabi ni Villar na dapat magkaroon ng mahusay na pamamahala at proteksiyon ng pangisdaan sa buong bansa upang matiyak na patuloy ang suplay ng pagkain mula sa karagatan, kita ng mangingsda at trabaho sa food processor at katulad na paggawa.

Sa ngayon, kabilang ang Pilipinas sa 10 nangungunang bansa sa mundo sa produksyon ng isda.

Binigyang diin din ng senador ang pangangailangan ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources ng suporta ng lokal na komunidad at eksperto sa iba pang ahensiya ng pamahalaan, regional organizations at non-government organizations upang pamahalaan at pangasiwaan ang complex marine ecosystems na nagtataguyod sa fisheries.

Bilang suporta na rin sa sektor ng mga mangingsda, isinulong ng senador ang pagsasabatas ng Republic Act 10654 na nag-amyenda sa RA 8550 (Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998) noong February 27, 2015 na nagpaparusa sa illegal, unreported at unregulated fishing na may mataas na parusa.

Sinisiguro rin ng batas na ang management ng fishery at aquatic resources ay ayon sa ecosystem-based approach sa pangingsda.

**ERNIE REYES**





## Ombudsman niloko sa NFA scam listahan - Martires

Binawi ng Office of the Ombudsman ang suspension order laban sa 23 tauhan ng National Food Authority (NFA) na isinangkot sa umano'y maanomalyang pagbenta ng bigas sa mga pribadong trader dahilan para malugi ang pamahalaan.

Sinabi ni Ombudsman Samuel Martires na inalis ang suspension order matapos makita ng mga imbestigador mula sa kanyang tanggapan ang maling datos sa listahang ibinigay sa kanila ng Department of Agriculture (DA) na kinuha umano mula sa NFA.

"Kung may pagkakamali sa listahan na iyan, hindi namin kasalanan iyon. Hindi ko alam kung sino nanloko sa amin," ayon kay Martires sa isang panayam ng Dobol B TV nitong Biyernes, Marso 15.

Ayon kay Martires, sinabi ng NFA na inakala nilang ang hinahanap na listahan ay para sa mga miyembro ng task force sa El Niño.

"Ang tanong lang namin, kung listahan ng task force ng El Niño, bakit sinama 'yong mga kawani na patay na? Ano 'yong purpose noon? Niloloko n'yo ang secretary of Agriculture?" sabi ni Martires.

Aniya, iniimbestigahan na rin nila kung sino ang nasa likod ng listahan.

Samantala, sinabi ni Martires na kabilang sa mga tauhan ng NFA na tinanggal ang suspensi-

yon ay mga warehouse supervisor.

"After conducting initial investigation ng mga imbestigador namin, nirekomenda nila na i-lift ang preventive suspension sa mga warehouse supervisors sa Iloilo, Antique, Cabanatuan, basta NCR. Basta mga 23 lahat 'yon," ani Martires.

Samantala, hinihintay ng DA ang utos mula sa Ombudsman kaugnay sa pagbawi ng suspensiyon ng 23 empleyado ng NFA

mula sa 139 na pinatawan ng suspension order dahil sa bentahan ng bigas sa murang halaga lamang.

Sa Bagong Pilipinas public briefing, sinabi ni DA Assistant Secretary at Spokesman Arnel de Mesa na hindi pa natatangap ng kanilang tanggapan ang bagong kautusan ng Ombudsman.

Ang mayroon lamang niya sila ay kopya sa binawing suspensiyon ng NFA assistant manager sa Batangas kaya makakaba-

lik na ito sa puwesto.

"Hindi pa nari-receive ng DA iyong bagong kautusan ng Ombudsman pero may na-receive na iyong National Food Authority para kay Ginoong Cordero, iyong assistant branch manager ng Batangas, so na-lift na iyong suspension niya. So hinihintay namin ngayon itong panibagong mahigit sa dalawampu na na-lift nga iyong suspension," ani de Mesa. **(Dolly Cabreza/Aileen Taliping)**





BOYET JABULCO

## FOR THE RECORD

Mainit na ang panahon pero mas nakapang-iinit ng ulo itong kontrobersya sa National Food Authority (NFA). Mantakin ba naman kasing ibinenta ang 75,000 sako ng NFA rice sa halagang P93.75 milyon sa dalawang pribadong rice trader nang walang bidding at approval ng NFA Council.

Suspendido na ang 139 opisyal at empleyado ng NFA at gumugulong na rin ang imbestigasyon ng Department of Agriculture pati na sa Kamara de Representantes.

Sa nakaraang hearing ng House Committee on Agriculture and Food, nangatuwiran pa si suspended NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco na bago raw siya naupo sa puwesto noong Enero 2023, nagbebenta na raw ang NFA sa mga pribadong trader noong 2021 at 2022 na umaabot

## Bantayan ang pondo ng NFA

ng tatlo hanggang apat na milyong bag na wala rin bidding.

Ibig sigurong palabasin ni Bioco, matagal na itong ginagawa sa NFA bago binuko ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

Pero kahit sabihin pang matagal na itong ginagawa, hindi ito indikasyon na tama ang pagbebenta ng NFA rice sa mga pribadong trader.

Napakalaki ng budget na binibigay ng Kongreso sa NFA kaya naman isinusulong ni Makati City Rep. Luis Campos Jr. na maging masigasig ang congressional oversight sa multibillion peso Rice Buffer Stocking Program.

"Congress must take strong action to safeguard the buffer stocking program, which is meant to keep an optimal level of rice reserves at all times for use during emergencies, while providing strong buying support to local farmers," giit ni Campos.

Binanggit ni Campos na umaasa sila sa Congressional Oversight Committee on Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization na magsagawa ng im-

bestigasyon upang makapagpalabas ng rekomendasyon kung paano paiigtingin ang transparency at panangutanan sa buffer stocking operations.

Sa ilalim ng 2024 national budget, binanggit ni Campos na naglaan ang Kongreso ng P9 bilyon para sa buffer stocking program, bukod pa ito sa nilaan na P9 bilyon noong 2023.

Inaalagaan ng buffer stocking program ang imbentaryo ng bigas upang may magamit sa panahon ng kalamidad, fortuitous events o kaya ay kung kapos sa produksyon. Sa programang ito, pinahihintulutan ang pagbenta ng bigas sa National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology at iba pang ahensiya ng gobyerno.

Suportado ni Campos ang naging hakbang ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., Secretary Laurel at Speaker Romualdez na ang pondo para sa buffer stocking program ay magamit lamang sa wastong paraan.





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## Patay, retirado, bodegero kasama sa sinuspindeng NFA employees

Kinuwestyon ni Abang Lingkod Partylist Rep. Joseph Stephen Paduano na bakit pati namatay na, retirado, mga empleyado na karamihan ay mga warehouse staff o mga bodegero ay nasama sa listahan ng mga nasuspindeng tauhan ng National Food Authority (NFA) dahil sa maanom-

yang pagbebenta ng 75,000 buffer stocks ng bigas ng ahensiya.

Kabilang sa mga nasuspinde ang mga Branch at Regional Managers, 108 NFA employees na mayorya rito ay mga bodegero na ayon sa solon ay sumunod lamang sa utos ng kanilang mga superiors na ilabas ang mga bigas sa mga bodega ng NFA.

Anyo, dapat ay nalinis munang mabuti ang listahan na ibinigay sa Ombudsman para hindi nadamay ang mga walang kinalaman.

Una nang inirekomenda ni Lee kay Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. na ubusin ang lahat ng tiwaling opisyal sa NFA upang manumbalik ang tiwala ng taumbayan sa ahensiya.

Bukod sa 139 opisyal at mga empleyado ng NFA na

nasuspinde ay humabol pa sa pinatawan ng suspension order ng Ombudsman sina NFA OIC Piolito Santos at Jonathan Yazon, acting Department Manager for Operation.

Kaugnay nito, kinumpirma ni Ombudsman Samuel Martires na inalis na ang suspension order ng 23 tauhan ng NFA makaraang mapatunayan ng kanilang mga imbestigador na may pagkakamali ang listahan ng mga taong isinasangkot sa anomalya na nakatala sa Department of Agriculture (DA).

Sinabi ni Martires na ang ilan sa mga tauhan ng NFA na inalis ang suspension order ay mga warehouse supervisors sa National Capital Region, Iloilo, Antique at Cabanatuan. (Joy Santos/ Angie dela Cruz)





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## Bol to harness PH cold chain for bangus industry

THE Board of Investments (BoI), logistics providers, and other government agencies are collaborating to seize investment opportunities to develop the cold chain system for the bangus (milkfish) industry.

The BoI sees substantial opportunity gains of around \$126.71 million with over 120 industry stakeholders having committed to explore the potential of the cold chain and expansion of the milkfish sector.

The stakeholders include bangus producers and cooperatives, cold chain operators, logistics providers, and investors, with

the majority coming from Pangasinan.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Building Safe Agricultural Food Enterprises (B-SAFE) program, an estimated 22,444 metric tons (MT) of milkfish in Pangasinan need post-harvest facilities and a cold chain system to improve the quality of trade and consumption.

"Hence, it underscores a substantial opportunity for potential gains of around \$126.71 million, contingent upon sufficient investments to enhance processing, handling, transport, and

distribution systems, along with the establishment of an efficient coordination mechanism across the industry," the BoI said.

The bureau's Resource-Based Industries Service director Raquel Echague said some companies had shown interest in the industry's expansion.

3M Dragon Logistics Corp. detailed their current business operations while Royale Cold Storage showed how it benefited from fiscal and non-fiscal incentives offered by the government after successfully registering multiple cold storage projects with the BoI.

The province of Pangasinan contributes 39 percent or roughly 138,818.74 MT to the country's total milkfish production, accounting for 52 percent of the country's milkfish trade in 2023.

B-SAFE senior policy adviser Ramon Clarete also emphasized the need for a fully functioning cold chain system for food safety, especially for export.

Initiatives of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Unido) through its Food Cold Chain Project, specifically the Cold Chain Innovation Hub, were also highlighted.

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**





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## Dry spell damage to agri up P400M

**CALAPAN CITY:** The damage to agriculture in Oriental Mindoro by the ongoing dry spell reached more than P415 million, the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (PDRRMO) here reported on Friday, March 15.

Vinscent Gahol, head of the PDRRMO, said that based on a March 13 report by the Provincial Agriculturist Office, the total damage in agriculture is now at P415,421,044.35.

The amount is based on the reports submitted by the municipal agriculture offices from the four towns of the province.

"Damages are total or partial destruction of capital assets, infrastructure such as animal sheds, storage, ice plants, irrigation, inventory of goods like agricultural inputs; equipment, machinery; and raw materials for production,

among others. Damages are valued as the cost of replacement or repair of destroyed structures or equipment at pre-disaster prices while agricultural products are valued at pre-disaster farm gate prices," the report said.

Among the affected crops are palay, red onions, melons, eggplants, ampalaya (bitter melon), squash, mung beans, bananas, sweet potatoes, corn, bush sitao and watermelons.

Meanwhile, 1,279 farmers from the 12 barangay (villages) in Bulalacao town have been affected by the El Niño phenomenon. Also affected were 1,069 farmers from 12 villages in Mansalay town; 35 farmers from eight villages in Bongabong; and 45 farmers in Pinamalayan, the report said.

"We are still waiting for the reports from the other towns. The four towns that initially submitted their reports are from the southernmost towns of the province that are experiencing drought due to lack of rainfall. Most of the river systems in the area had already dried up," Gahol said in a phone interview.

"We are going to discuss this matter to the governor (Humerlito Dolor), to plan for the intervention that the provincial government could make."

**IRE JOE V.C. LAURENTE**





## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CHIT U. JUAN

### Survival - the Ivatan way

The Ivatans are an Austronesian ethnolinguistic group inhabiting the Batan islands - Batanes and Babuyan islands in the northernmost Philippines.

Batanes is actually closer to Taiwan than it is to the nearest island of Luzon. I was fortunate to finally visit Batanes and learn more about their food culture.

I hope to help them form a Slow Food community ([www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)) to preserve their interesting habits which have made them survive typhoons, rains and all the weather disturbances affecting their small island.

A few months before the rains come, an Ivatan already finds a pig to buy, to make the family's stockpile of meat for the wet or rainy season. The pork meat is salted and then fried, and kept submerged in its own oil or lard to preserve it for many months to come.

This is in preparation for the months when one cannot go to market for meat. The market vendors may have no meat to sell for the long duration of rainy season. At this time, Ivatans dig into their treasure trove of salted pieces of pork, sometimes even a palm-sized portion is already enough for a family.

Because when the weather is bad and one cannot find fresh produce or meat, a family prepares its survival dishes - "meatballs" made from felled banana trunks, the core of which is diced and mixed with fish or some pork. Other survival fare will be root crops like sweet potato, gabi or taro and cassava.

Even fish has to be gutted and dried but only to be salted and preserved for future use.

There are many kinds of *paopao* or dried fish which becomes the protein source for rainy days. Famous among all is the *dorado*, or mahi mahi, a fish that is plentiful in the coasts of Batanes. These are gutted, but are not sold yet until the season for selling comes. While one can use the innards for soup or other fare for free, the fish meat is carefully preserved, dried and salted - and saved for future use and sale.

The flying fish or *dibang* is also known for being salted and dried, and the best part to eat is the bone, crunchy and tasteful. It's like when we are not yet aware of the taste of *bangus* belly and we just eat the meat around it, avoiding the blackish jelly-like parts. When we finally try the belly, our lives get changed forever. The same happens with the bony part of the flying fish. When I saw a local eat the bones first, I followed suit and I discovered the best part of this fish.



Root crops are plentiful and can substitute for rice anytime. The locals simply cut them into pieces small enough to fit a pot - and the juice of these boiled root crops is a sweet liquid you can take as soup with all the vitamins intact.

As we hold our *kabaya*, a giant leaf that serves as our "plate," we take a little of the fish, the meatballs, root crops and a sampling of the fish - one-day-old *dibang* with bones fried crisp and the tender *dorado* just wrapped in banana leaves and grilled over slow fire.

The local vegetables are similar to our *kangkong*, called *rerey*, and other wild camote-like shoots called *yayud*. They also cook taro vines called *venes*, similar to what we call *takway*, very much a local delicacy. The Batanes garlic and onions are also more pungent and are known to be a good sauce to fish and other proteins.

All these food preservation practices of the Ivatans could be applicable to our food insecurity state of today. The Ivatans knew when food was plenty and prepared well for the time when food would be scarce. Time was when a family could only buy one pig to last them through the year. But last it did, and tradition allows them to do all the preservation techniques with ease. Salt the pork, submerge in fat and lard. Take a small piece at a time and share with family. Dry the fish. Store for future use. Grow root crops, they are resilient to weather changes. Boil and eat. Simple practices like these ensure a sustainable lifestyle for the whole clan, the whole tribe.

In olden times, they are lucky to have one boat carry provisions once a year from Luzon while their farmers brought their cattle and pigs to trade for other supplies. These days, there are cargo ships that regularly ply the Pangasinan-Batanes routes as well as daily flights on major carriers.

The pandemic taught them to look around and appreciate their self-sufficiency because they survived even while being locked down from Luzon and the rest of the country. They went back to agriculture, fishing and farming, which the youth then had unfortunately started to abandon as a career option. Now, the youth may think twice and hopefully will take up the challenge to be farmers.

It really is wonderful to know that the Ivatans know how to survive through long rainy seasons and dry spells, long before food security was a topic to be concerned about. To them, it was simply living. To go with the flow of Nature and to know when to hunt and gather, to harvest and preserve and to still have enough to eat until the next good weather comes around.

So there is much to learn from our Ivatan brothers and sisters. It also is easier to manage as Batanes is an island and that has its benefits. Rather than feel isolated, you can actually feel independent and self-sufficient.

You must consider a trip to Batanes to better appreciate Nature's bounty and how to live with the seasons rather than curse climate change. We can certainly learn a thing or two from them.







# *PH private sector sets trade visit to Malaysia for agri collab*

**A PRIVATE sector-led initiative to collaborate with Malaysian agriculture companies is set from April 23 to 24.** On the agenda are the exploration of commercial values in agricultural commodities for both countries. The targeted commodities include palm oil, rubber, rice, dairy, poultry, pineapple, durian, banana, coconut, and corn. The details of the planned trade visit were discussed in a meeting organized by proponents of the Kapatid

Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (KAL-AP) led by ASEAN Business Advisory Council (BAC) Philippines chairman and Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion. The meeting was participated in by some of the Philippines's largest agriculture companies, including Universal Leaf Philippines, Yovel East Agriventures, Lionheart Farms, and Iba Botanicals, as well as commodity players represented by Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement, the Philippine Rubber Industry Council,

and the UNAHCO-Philippine Association of Feed Millers. The discussions were led by Go Negosyo senior advisers, former Agriculture Secretary Dr. William Dar and Josephine Romero. Representing the ASEANBAC was its Executive Director Gil Gonzales. The trade mission follows the signing last year of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) initiated by the ASEANBAC Philippines with ASEAN BAC Malaysia, where both countries agreed to engage in promoting trade,

investment, and other development partnerships in agriculture. The meetings will be conducted through the ABAC Malaysia B2B Connect Initiative (BCI) led by Malaysia's former trade minister Dato' Sri Mustapa Mohamed, and will involve industry leaders from both the public and private sectors to explore projects to be undertaken under the MOU. The meeting with the Malaysia private sector is expected to kick off similar cooperation activities between ABAC Philippines and all the other signatories of the MOU - namely Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, and Thailand.