

CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, MARCH 22, 2024

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

THE MANILA TIMES
NFA sold P12-B rice sans bidding

BUSINESS WORLD
NEDA to roll out real-time agri market info system

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
DA: Lenders can charge
DA chief orders transfer of suspended NFA supervisors' authority
Commonsense: Rot and rats at the NFA

B. DA FAMILY

MANILA STANDARD
Group: NFA stocks down to 2 days

MANILA BULLETIN
Villar cites law revitalizing PH salt industry

BUSINESS WORLD
Farmers expose NFA rice sales

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT
Coast Guard, BFAR ships secure underwater survey
Govt hikes discounts for seniors, PWDs

REMATE
El Niño makaaapekto sa mahigit 70 lalawigan

ABANTE
Agri binoldyak sa bigas scam

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL
El Niño threat

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

MANILA STANDARD
Photo: Solar farm

THE MANILA TIMES
Absence of a science-based culture
Editorial: Road map points the way to PH coffee industry comeback

MANILA BULLETIN
Growing things for fun and profit after the pandemic

BUSINESS MIRROR
El Niño seen to impact agri, growth entire year
Czech Republic says keen on exporting farm, food items, training PHL farmers

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL
Editorial: El Niño effects

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT
Soybeans, wheat climb



FEDERATION OF FREE FARMERS:

NFA sold P12-B rice sans bidding

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

FARMERS on Thursday said the **National Food Authority (NFA)** sold millions of sacks of rice to private traders since 2019 without going through the bidding process, and said the improper sale early this year of 75,000 bags was just “the tip of the iceberg.”

In a statement, the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) said that in 2021, the NFA sold about 5.6 million bags of rice, each weighing 50 kilos, to private buyers under the guise of disposing of aging stock.

This accounted for about two-thirds of the total volume sold by the agency during

the year, while the remaining portion was allocated to calamity assistance and relief operations, said FFF National Manager Raul Montemayor.

The farmers group added that in 2022, the NFA sold 4 million sacks of rice to private traders, again claiming that these were

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■ **BIDDING FROM A1**

NFA sold P12-B rice sans bidding

aging stock. This comprised more than 70 percent of its total sales for that year.

"The rapid disposition of its rice supplies in 2021 and 2022 resulted in the severe depletion of NFA's inventory, with the agency having only 3.5 days of national consumption requirement at the end of 2022," the FFF said.

The group said the 9.6 million sacks sold in 2021 and 2022 amounted to P12 billion, as a 50-kilo sack was sold for P1,250.

Montemayor said the alleged sale of about 75,000 bags of aging stock to private traders early this year was only a small part of the total picture.

"Much larger transactions occurred in previous years, with buyers paying only P25 per kilo without going through bidding," he said.

Additionally, Montemayor said there were instances where the sales were documented after the rice was

actually transferred to buyers, allowing the transactions to be categorized as the disposal of old stock.

The FFF estimated that during the first two months of 2022, only about 153,000 sacks of rice derived from palay bought in July and August of the previous year could be considered aging stock.

"However, records show that the NFA sold a million bags of rice to private buyers during the first two months of 2022," Montemayor said.

Newly appointed NFA Officer in Charge Larry Lacson said Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has already ordered the investigation of the alleged improper rice sales since 2019.

"So I think it would be best if we wait for the result [of the investigation]," Lacson said.

Under Republic Act 11203 or the

"Rice Tariffication Law (RTL)," the NFA is required to maintain rice buffer stock equal to at least nine days of national consumption and distribute it solely to calamity victims.

The RTL's implementing guidelines, however, permit the agency to sell aging stocks to private entities if the palay has been stored for over six months, or three months for rice inventories.

Montemayor urged the Department of Agriculture and the Ombudsman to speed up their investigations of the buffer stock anomalies under the NFA so it could return to its normal operations, especially with the upcoming harvest season.

"It cannot move with so many of its top officials suspended for six months and some warehouses reportedly padlocked, pending the results of the investigations," Montemayor said.



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NEDA to roll out real-time agri market info system

THE National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) said it plans to set up an information system supplying real-time agricultural data.

“What we have agreed on is really to implement right away the national information marketing network... because we see that there are inefficiencies in our market,” NEDA Undersecretary Rosemarie G. Edillon told reporters on the sidelines of the United Nations Development Programme Investor Map for the Philippines launch.

“For example, you’re a trader from Pampanga, and you find

out that it’s cheaper (to trade) in Tarlac, then you go to Tarlac,” Ms. Edillon said in Filipino.

The information system would be patterned after the National Information Network (NIN) under Republic Act No. 8435 or the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act.

The NIN was meant to harmonize inconsistent agricultural data from various agencies and research institutions.

Separately, NEDA’s food inflation subcommittee is looking into the Department of Agriculture’s (DA) delayed distribution of minimum access volume (MAV) quota allocations this year.

In February, the DA proposed the suspension of the MAV for pork and corn to lower dependence on imports. The quota for pork was to be reallocated to give processors a larger share compared to the traders.

Last month, the Meat Importers and Traders Association wrote to Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr., saying the quotas should have been distributed earlier this year.

Under the MAV, overseas producers of selected commodities are allowed to ship in goods up to a quota for a lower tariff, with shipments exceeding the quota

charged higher rates. The MAV system is a feature of the World Trade Organization’s trading system.

In December, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. signed Executive Order 50, which extended the low-tariff regime for pork, rice, corn and coal.

Tariff rates were kept at 15% (within the MAV quota) and 25% (for shipments exceeding the quota) for pork, 5% (within the quota) and 15% (for shipments exceeding the quota) for corn, and 35% (all countries of origin) for rice until Dec. 31. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**



DA: Lenders can charge 2% interest on agri loans

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The Department of Agriculture allowed its partner lenders to charge an annual two percent interest rate on a state-funded loan product intended to finance agricultural businesses owned by small farmers and fisherfolk.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. issued Memorandum Circular 10 Series of 2024 that amended the prevailing interest rate of the Agricultural Credit Policy Council (ACPC)'s Agri-Negosyo or ANYO Loan program.

Tiu Laurel made the amendment after

the ACPC Governing Council, through Resolution 1 Series of 2024, approved the authorization of partner lending conduits (PLCs) to charge two percent interest per annum for the ANYO program.

With the amendment, the ANYO program, which seeks to finance capital requirements of micro and small agri-fishery enterprises, will now have a total finance charge of 5.5 percent per annum.

Previously, the loan program did not allow PLCs to charge an interest rate. The PLCs only imposed a one-time 3.5 percent service fee.

The ANYO loan program has two products: a micro agri-negosyo loan and a small agri-negosyo loan.

Under the micro agri-negosyo loan, borrowers can get up to P300,000 while the small-agri negosyo loan has a minimum amount of P300,000 and a maximum amount of P15 million.

The ACPC's loan programs are coursed through PLCs, with the former providing the credit budget and the latter facilitating the loan portfolio.

Monetary Board member V. Bruce Tolentino said the imposition of the interest fee would "incentivize" PLCs to expand their coverage and build up their own loan programs for agricultural start-ups.

The collected interest fees, Tolentino pointed out, would allow the PLCs to bankroll more loans since the budget of the ACPC is miniscule compared to the overall demand of agri-fishery enterprises.

The ACPC has a P2.75-billion budget for its various credit programs this year, including the ANYO loan facility.

"(It will) push the participating banks to find more borrowers and entrepreneurs. We are encouraging them to do a lot more by in effect providing them the opening to increase their service fees," Tolentino told **The STAR** in a recent interview.

Tolentino noted that PLCs exert the same effort in facilitating small and big loans.

"If there is no incentive to work, then they will focus on the big loans," he said, referring to the PLCs.

Tolentino added that the effective 5.5 percent charge of the ANYO program was still lower than the prevailing interest rates of commercial loans for agriculture, which range from eight to 10 percent.

ANYO is one of the best performing credit programs of the ACPC, posting a 100-percent liquidation rate last year.

In 2023, the ANYO program released P1.886 billion in loans, up 18 percent from the P1.595 billion in 2022.

The ANYO program had 17,561 end-borrowers last year, a quarter more than the 14,055 recorded in 2022.



DA chief orders transfer of suspended NFA supervisors' authority

By BELLA CARIASO

The transfer of authority of suspended warehouse supervisors of the National Food Authority has been ordered by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. yesterday as NFA facilities remain closed amid the suspension order of the Office of the Ombudsman.

Department of Agriculture (DA) spokesman Arnel de Mesa recently confirmed that 79 warehouses of the NFA remained closed amid the preventive suspension imposed by the ombudsman on 99 NFA personnel.

De Mesa said that the priority of the DA is to appoint personnel in padlocked warehouses amid the possible deterioration of stocks.

"I don't know the inventory but eventually we need to fumigate to ensure there will be no problem on the palay and rice (stocks). Once it is padlocked, no stocks will be allowed to leave or enter," De Mesa noted.

Agri party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee said that the closure of NFA warehouses in Nueva Ecija has already resulted in the P2 per kilo drop in the farmgate price of palay.

"The farmers have no choice. They were even advised to bring their harvest to Pampanga. It will entail logistics. They will be forced to sell to local traders at lower prices," Lee said.

Ombudsman Samuel Martires questioned the closure of the NFA warehouses amid the ongoing ombudsman investigation.

"The assistant regional director or the assistant branch manager, in case the branch manager is suspended, can always designate somebody to act temporarily as warehouseman. There is no need to close the warehouses," Martires said.

He said it would be unfair to make it appear that the ombudsman's suspension order against several NFA officials and employees hampers the operations of the warehouses.

"It only goes to show that, if they cannot designate people, the NFA is inefficient," Martires said.

The NFA Council has appointed former Bureau of Plant Industry director Larry Lacson as officer-in-charge of the agency.

He said that the average buying price

of NFA ranged between P16 and P19 per kilo for fresh palay and between P19 and P23 per kilo for dry and clean palay.

De Mesa said the NFA has a P17.2-billion budget for its procurement of palay.

Documents suppression

Martires bared that there was a deliberate attempt by the NFA to suppress some documents that would be relevant in his office's ongoing investigation on the allegedly anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks to favored private traders.

In an interview with *dzBB* yesterday, Martires said his "asset" in the NFA told him that a certain official of the agency gave instruction not to release documents to ombudsman investigators in connection with the ongoing probe on NFA officials and employees allegedly involved in the supposed rice sale anomaly.

Martires did not disclose the name of the NFA official who supposedly made the order. He said apart from a partial list of warehouses of milled rice, no other documents were submitted to his office by the NFA since then, prompting his investigators to go to various warehouses to collate documents.

Martires said his office's investigation is pushing through with some developments to be expected after Holy Week.

Meanwhile, Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) national manager Raul Montemayor said that in 2021 and 2022 the NFA sold at least 9.6 million sacks of NFA rice amounting to P12 billion to private traders without conducting public bidding.

"The alleged sale of around 75,000 bags of aging NFA stocks to private traders in early 2024 is just the tip of the iceberg. Much larger transactions occurred in previous years, with buyers paying only P25 per kilo without going through bidding," Montemayor said.

Citing FFF sources, Montemayor said that in 2021 alone, nearly 5.6 million bags were allowed to be procured by select rice traders in the guise of aging stocks.

He said these constituted at least two-thirds of the total volume disposed of by the agency during the year, with the balance going to government programs for calamity assistance and other relief operations.

- With Elizabeth Marcelo

COMMONSENSE

MARICHU A. VILLANUEVA

Rot and rats at the NFA

From day one of his administration, President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (PBBM) held in concurrent capacity the Department of Agriculture (DA) to directly handle the country's food security concerns with utmost urgency. During that period, the country has been reeling from high prices of rice and other basic food products.



PBBM immediately buckled down to address the most immediate bottlenecks in the value chain and logistics issues that have been hobbling the country's agriculture. This was until he relinquished this Cabinet post in November last year. Apparently believing he has done so much already to improve the DA bureaucratic machinery, he relinquished this Cabinet post and appointed fishing magnate Francisco Tiu-Laurel Jr. to become his permanent Agriculture Secretary.

Barely five months into office of Tiu, a partylist lawmaker now wants PBBM to take over again, specifically the management of the National Food Authority (NFA) following the reported illegal sale of rice buffer stocks to private sector traders. Agri partylist Rep. Wilbert Lee echoed this urgent call to PBBM at the *Kapihan sa Manila Bay* news forum held last Wednesday.

In impassioned appeal, the lawmaker whose party list represents the agriculture sector asked PBBM that it is about time for the Chief Executive to personally lead NFA. The NFA, a government-owned and -managed corporation, is attached to the DA. Although headed by an Administrator, its policy-making body is run by the NFA Council chaired by the Agriculture Secretary.

The NFA Council appointed last Monday the director of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Larry Lacson, to concurrently serve as officer-in-charge (OIC) of NFA and to restore its normal operations at the soonest possible time.

The neophyte lawmaker though was unconvinced and insisted the President must take a direct hand to immediately restore the operations of the NFA. Only the President, he believes can resolve the reported continuing shenanigans at the NFA that resulted to padlocking of rice warehouses all over the country.

"Investigation on NFA should not be delayed. It is very obvious that there are high-ranking officials there who should be removed from office. They are involved in corruption and are neglecting their jobs, leading to this anomaly and it's the farmers who are suffering," Rep. Lee deplored.

Lee's call came after the Ombudsman on March 4 suspended 141 NFA officials and employees, led by administrator Roderico Bioco, assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermiano and other NFA officials and employees who are facing administrative charges of grave misconduct, gross neglect of duty and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service. A week after, the Ombudsman also suspended newly appointed OIC at NFA, deputy administrator Piolito Santos and acting department manager for operation and coordination Jonathan Yazon who were added as respondents in the administrative charges.

"The Secretary wants that the NFA will be back to normal operation as soon as possible," De Mesa stressed.



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The Agri party list solon also pushed for legal actions to unmask the unscrupulous rice traders and be similarly held liable and correspondingly punished. During a hearing of the House Committee on Agriculture and Food, Lee rued, it turned out that the sold 75,000 bags of rice stocks were still of good quality. The agency is only allowed to dispose of stocks through public auction before their quality deteriorates or become unsafe for consumption.

Lee noted that it was also revealed at the same public hearing that the rice buffer stocks were sold to private traders for P25 per kilogram when it can be sold in the market for as much as P70 per kilogram. "The President should really take over in the efforts to cleanse the NFA so that the trust of the public will return," the Agri party list representative exhorted PBBM.

At the same news forum at *Kapihan sa Manila Bay*, DA assistant secretary and official spokesman Arnel de Mesa assuaged the lawmaker that Tiu-Laurel has already ordered an internal investigation into these questioned sale of rice stocks. De Mesa cited that this is on top of the *motu proprio* investigation on the suspended NFA officials and employees based on the DA list submitted to the Office of Ombudsman Samuel Martires.

De Mesa noted with optimism the Ombudsman lifting of preventive suspension for 24 of them, who included 23 warehouse supervisors in the National Capital Region (NCR), regions 2 and 6 as well the acting Batangas NFA Branch Manager Harold Cuartero.

"The Secretary wants that the NFA will be back to normal operation as soon as possible," De Mesa stressed.

According to De Mesa, the NFA has a total of 288 NFA warehouses nationwide where 99 of these were padlocked amid the suspension of 99 supervisors. However, after the Ombudsman subsequently lifted the suspension of 20 warehouse supervisors, or "bodegeros," they went back to their respective posts and reopened their respective NFA warehouses.

"At present, there are 169 warehouses that are not affected," De Mesa assuaged the public. "The Secretary was hoping that more (NFA employees) will be covered by the lifting of the suspension. It is very difficult for the employees of NFA, especially the rank and file, to be slapped with a six months suspension without pay," De Mesa pointed out.

Lawyer Dino de Leon who represents 108 of the NFA suspended officials and employees denounced the mass suspension of his clients, saying it was done on "shotgun" basis and without due process. According to De Leon, he took their case on *pro bono* basis precisely after the Ombudsman immediately declared his clients practically guilty already due to supposed probable cause to justify the hasty imposition of the preventive suspension.

However, De Leon complained the Ombudsman has yet to give them a list of suspended NFA officials and employees and specific charges against them. But already, De Leon feels sorry for his clients who were already serving their suspension based on the Ombudsman's order.

Martires questioned though yesterday why should the Ombudsman be blamed for NFA's own actions to padlock their warehouses. While he lauded the cooperation of the DA Secretary, Martires denounced alleged attempts of unnamed NFA officials who obviously wanted to drag down the Ombudsman investigation.

"So don't blame me *kung mabubulok ang bigas*," Martires quipped.

Preventing rice from getting rotten must start at removing the rot and the rats at the NFA.





Group: NFA stocks down to 2 days

By Othel V. Campos

THE rapid depletion of the National Food Agency's rice buffer stocks, now reportedly at less than two days of national consumption, has caused alarm, the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) said Thursday.

FFF national manager Raul Montemayor said they urged a swift resolution to the ongoing investigations on the rice mismanagement issues at the NFA to ensure transparency and allow the agency

to fulfill its crucial role in national food security.

With harvests underway, the FFF emphasized the urgency for the NFA to resume normal operations and replenish its

reserves through "palay" (unmilled rice) procurement.

However, ongoing investigations by the Department of Agriculture and the Office of the Ombudsman, coupled with the suspension of several top NFA officials and the potential closure of warehouses pending investigation results, are hindering the agency's ability to function effectively, the federation said.

The group alleged potential violations of regulations and raised concerns about preferential treatment for certain buyers.

Montemayor said some rice stocks

might have been milled recently but then sold as "aged" to meet disposal criteria.

He hinted that sales might have been backdated to qualify for specific regulations on "ageing stocks".

Citing data discrepancies between rice purchased and sold within short timeframes, Montemayor raised doubts about the legitimacy of these transactions.

The FFF alleged that millions of sacks of affordable rice, meant for emergencies and stabilizing prices, were sold directly to private traders in 2021 and 2022 without undergoing bidding.



Villar cites law revitalizing PH salt industry

By HANNAH TORREGOZA

Sen. Cynthia A. Villar has expressed optimism that President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s signing into law of Republic Act No. 11985, An Act Strengthening and Revitalizing the Salt Industry in the Philippines, will give "new life" to the country's dying salt industry.

Villar, chairperson of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Food, thanked the Chief Executive for signing the bill into law, saying she believes that the law is an answered prayer for the sector's many workers and stakeholders who have been appealing to revitalize the country's dying salt industry.

In particular, RA 11985 will address the expansion of the current salt farms concentrated in Pangasinan and Mindoro.

Under the new law, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) are mandated to map out, identify, and designate

public lands, including portions of municipal waters, as salt production areas within 60 days from the passage of this Act.

"Public land for salt production shall also be leased for a 25-year period, renewable for another 25 years, for use as salt farms," Villar noted.

"For this purpose, BFAR shall issue the Salt Production Tenorial Instrument where cooperatives and associations of subsistence and small producers and farmers shall be given preferential treatment," she added.

With the new law, Villar also said all coastal communities will again be able to engage in salt production.

Villar pushed for the revival of the salt industry, saying there is a necessity to meet the growing demand of Filipino household and the additional annual demand for 300,000 metric tons of salt as coconut fertilizer under the 2021 Coconut Farmers and Industry Trust Fund Act.

She lamented that the country's

salt production accounts for only 16.782 percent or 114,000 metric tons of the 683,000 metric tons annual demand.

The new law also seeks the formulation of a Philippine Salt Industry Development Roadmap that will include programs, projects, and interventions for the development and management, research, processing, utilization, modernization, and commercialization of Philippine salt.

The new law also seeks the creation of the 16-member Philippine Salt Industry Development Council headed by the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** Secretary.

"The Salt Industry Development Council is tasked to ensure the unified and integrated implementation of the salt roadmap," the senator said.

Tariffs to be collected from imported salt will also be plowed back to the industry with the creation of the Salt Industry Development and Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (SIDCEF), according to Villar.



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Farmers expose NFA rice sales

A TOTAL of 9.6 million sacks of rice were allegedly sold by the National Food Authority (NFA) to private rice retailers without proper bidding in the years 2021 and 2022, a farmers organization said on Thursday.

"The alleged sale of around 75,000 bags of aging NFA stocks to private traders in early 2024 is just the tip of the iceberg," Raul Q. Montemayor, national manager of the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF), said in a statement sent to *BusinessWorld*. "Much larger transactions occurred in previous years, with buyers paying only P25 per kilo without going through bidding."

He said this disposal of rice stocks by the NFA in 2021 and 2022 resulted in the agency depleting its rice stocks to only three-and-a-half days' worth of national consumption by end-2022 — a violation of Republic Act No. 11203 (Rice Tariffication Law) which mandates the NFA to maintain buffer stocks equivalent to 15 to 30 days of national rice consumption. —

Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio



Coast Guard, BFAR ships secure underwater survey

BY VICTOR REYES

TWO vessels from the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and another two from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) have been deployed to secure a government underwater survey in the West Philippine Sea in the South China Sea.

PCG spokesman for the West Philippine Sea Commodore Jay Tarriela, in a press briefing yesterday, said the vessels were deployed to address possible “trouble”

that might be caused by Chinese vessels.

The survey is being conducted at four cays near Pag-asa Island, the largest among nine features occupied by Filipino troops in the West Philippine Sea.

Pag-asa Island, about 180 nautical miles northwest from Puerto Princesa City in Palawan, serves as the seat of government of Kalayaan town, Palawan. It is about 14 nautical miles from the Chinese-

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See COAST > Page B5

COAST

occupied Subi Reef.

The survey, which started yesterday, is being conducted jointly by BFAR, Department of Agriculture’s National Fisheries Research Development Institute and the UP Institute of Biology.

The research at Sandy Cays 1, 2, 3 and 4 is meant to check the status of biodiversity in these areas. In September last year, crushed corals

were seen at one of the cays that Chinese vessels have frequented.

“That’s why we deployed two Coast Guard vessels, anticipating that the Chinese will always give us trouble in doing this kind of maritime scientific research,” Tarriela said.

As of last Tuesday, the Armed Forces said, there was one Chinese Navy ship, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel, and six Chinese fishing vessels near Pag-asa Island.

“Whether they are there or they are not there, we still have the

sovereign rights to do this kind of scientific research within the waters of Pag-asa Island,” said Tarriela.

Tarriela said the survey was authorized by the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea, headed by National Security Adviser Eduardo Año, and is being conducted in line with President Marcos Jr’s food security objective.

“The Philippine Coast Guard and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources were tapped

by the national task force to ensure that our food security is not compromised in the entire West Philippine Sea,” said Tarriela.

“For us to have a better appreciation and right evaluation of the aquatic resources that we have, we have to rely on science to do that. That is why we are doing this now,” he added.

China has been aggressive in its claims in the West Philippine Sea over the past year. It has harassed Philippine resupply missions at

the Philippine-occupied Ayungin Shoal in the past months.

Senior Filipino diplomats are meeting with their Japanese and US counterparts in Tokyo to prepare for the first-ever trilateral leaders’ summit to be held in the White House in Washington D.C. on April 11.

A foreign affairs official who requested anonymity said the Philippine team is headed by Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Ma. Theresa Lazaro.

Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Masataka Okano and Deputy State Secretary Kurt Campbell are representing the Japanese and US sides in the talks.

Campbell has been referred to as the chief architect of the Biden administration’s Asia strategy when he was serving as National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific region prior to his appointment as deputy secretary of state last month. — *With Ashzel Hachero*

Malaya Business Insight

Date: MAR 22, 2024 Page: A1 of A10



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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Govt hikes discounts for seniors, PWDs

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), together with the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** and Department of Energy (DOE) yesterday signed a joint administrative order (JAO) increasing the special discounts to senior citizens and persons with disabilities (PWDs) on basic necessities and prime commodities (BNPC).

The JAO takes effect upon publication on Monday, March 25.

This developed as the DTI has suspended indefinitely the issuance of a new Suggested Retail Price (SRP) Bulletin on 63 stock keeping units (SKUs) in 13 BNPC categories.

In a press conference yesterday, DTI Secretary Alfredo Pascual said the JAO revises the rules granting 5 percent special discounts to senior citizens and PWDs on the purchase of BNPCs.

The JAO increases the special discount for senior citizens and PWDs on BNPC purchases from P65 to P125 per week, subject to review every five years.

Pascual the JAO hikes the cap to P2,500, compared to the previous limit of P 1,300 per week set almost 14 years ago.

Covered goods under the JAO are BNPCs as defined by the Price Act which are essential for

consumers' sustenance, especially during calamities or emergencies.

The discount is for the exclusive use of senior citizens and PWDs, with no provision for carrying over any unused amount to succeeding weeks.

The JAO gives senior citizens and PWDs the right to purchase their basic goods through a representative as long as they have an authorization valid for 7 days and the senior citizen's booklet.

The discount also applies online purchases with mechanics to be drawn up by individual merchants

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See GOVT > Page A10

GOVT

and/or platforms.

The order clarifies the rule against double discounts but the higher discount will apply.

The DTI reminded abuse or misrepresentation to avail of the discount is meted with no less than six months imprisonment and a fine of P100,000.

Discounts under this JAO are separate from the 20 percent

statutory discount granted under Republic Act No. 9994 or the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010 and Republic Act No. 10754 or An Act Expanding the Benefits and Privileges of PWDs.

The JAO does not apply to registered Barangay Micro Business Establishments, cooperatives and sari sari stores.

Meanwhile, Assistant Secre-

tary Amanda Nograles said it has yet to act on the petition for price increase on 63 SKUs pending the submission of additional information from manufacturers.

Nograles said the strategy is to remove the confusion in implementing the SRP Bulletin by letting the adjusted prices take effect first. - *Irma Isip*

REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

Date: 22 MAR 2024 Page: 2



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El Niño makaaapekto sa mahigit 70 lalawigan

MAHIGIT sa 70 lalawigan ang maaapektuhan ng El Niño sa susunod na tatlong buwan.

Ito'y sa kabila ng napaulat na pahina ng weather pattern, ayon sa Task Force El Niño.

"Meron at meron pa ring mga probinsiya na maaapektuhan," pahayag ni Task Force El Niño spokesperson Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama.

"In fact, doon sa projection ng PAGASA ay tataas pa to mid-70s, mga 76 pa po ang puwedeng maaapektuhan na probinsiya in varying degrees in the next three months," dagdag na wika nito.

Sa ngayon, 67 lalawigan ang nakararanas na ng epekto ng El Niño habang 30 naman ang nahaharap sa matinding tag-init.

Para sa PAGASA, ang

tag-tuyot ay mayroong tatlong magkakasunod na buwan na "below normal rainfall conditions" na may mahigit sa 60% reduction mula sa average rainfall.

Maaari rin itong maging limang magkakasunod na buwan na "below normal rainfall conditions" na may 21% hanggang 60% reduction mula sa average rainfall.

Idineklara naman ang state of calamity sa anim na lugar gaya ng Bulalacao at Mansalay sa Oriental Mindoro; Looc, Magsaysay, at San Jose sa Occidental Mindoro; at Zamboanga City sa Zamboanga del Sur. Sinabi ni Villarama na sa bayan ng Pio Duran sa Albay ay maaaring magdeklara ng state of calamity dahil sa epekto ng El Niño. Tumaas naman ang kaso ng diarrhea sa Paluan, Occidental

Mindoro, dahil sa limitadong supply ng potable water.

Sa kabilang dako, sinabi naman ng Department of Agriculture, may kabuuang P1.75B na pinsala sa agrikultura ang naiulat dahil sa El Niño. May 24,409 mag-sasaka at mangingisda at maging 26,731 ektarya ng mga pananim ang apektado base sa pinakabagong report ng National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. Samantala, idineklara naman ng PAGASA na nagsimula ng Hulyo 4 ang El Niño phenomenon noong nakaraang taon.

Inilalarawan ang El Niño phenomenon bilang abnormal warming ng sea surface temperatures sa central at eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, dahilan ng "below normal rainfall."

KRIS JOSE



AGRI BINOLDYAK SA BIGAS SCAM

NAHIHIRAPAN ang Office of the Ombudsman sa pag-imbetiga sa isyu ng bigas scam sa National Food Authority (NFA) dahil wala pang isinsumiteng mga dokumento ang Department of Agriculture (DA).

Himutok ni Ombudsman Samuel Martires, puro salita si Agriculture Assistant Secretary at spokesperson Arnél de Mesa pero hindi naman tinutumbasan ng aksyon.

"Ito ang nakakatawa nga dahil sinasabi nila palagi lalo na yung spokesperson nila na si Assistant Secretary de Mesa na sang-ayon sa utos ng secretary of Agriculture, ibigay na sa amin ang dokumento. Eh ano bang dokumento ang binigay nila sa amin?" wika ni Martires sa interview sa DZBB.

"Ang mahirap kasi kay Assistant Secretary De Mesa salita siya nang salita hindi muna niya i-verify, i-validate ang kanyang facts," dagdag pa niya.

Dahil aniya sa pinataw na suspension sa mga opisyal at empleyado ng NFA kaugnay ng kuwestiyonableng pagbebenta ng 75,000 sako ng bigas sa dalawang pinaborang rice

trader, sarado tuloy ngayon ang maraming warehouse ng NFA.

Ikinatuwiran umano ni De Mesa na hindi pa bonded ang mga warehouse kaya isinara muna ang mga ito.

Ngunit ayon kay Martires, puwede namang mag-appoint ng OIC sa warehouse at kumuha ng bond sa loob lamang ng isa hanggang tatlong araw.

"Kahapon sinabi na naman niya, nakasara ang mga warehouse. Hindi sila makapagbukas ng iba kasi 'yong iba ay hindi pa bonded," saad ng Ombudsman.

Aniya, March 4 pa sila nag-isyu ng preventive suspension pero hindi kumilos ang DA para maiyuhan ng bond ang mga bagong mangangasiwa ng warehouse.

"Ilang araw na ang nakakalipas, mga sampung araw na mahigit? Ilang araw ba bago makakuha ng bond? Pag maayos ang system ng Bureau of

Treasury, isang araw nakakakuha ka na ng bond," diin ni Martires.

Idinadahilan din daw ni De Mesa na hindi kuwalipikado sa bond ang mga assistant warehouse supervisor dahil sa mababa ang salary grade, bagay na walang katotohanan dahil ang requirement lang ay permanente ang appointment ng assistant warehouse supervisor o OIC ng bodega.

Sinabi ni Martires na lumalabas na parang ang Ombudsman pa ngayon ang sinisisi sa mga nakasara warehouse.

"Hindi sila kailangan magsara ng warehouses. Ang nakakatakot nito dahil sinasabi nilang nakasara karamihan ng warehouses, sa amin pa isisisi na hindi sila makabili ng palay," giit ng Ombudsman.

"Sana si Asec De Mesa, pag-aralan muna niya ang sistema ng NFA kung ano ang mangyayari kapag itong tao ito ay wala," diin ni Martires.



EL NIÑO THREAT

THE number of provinces to be affected by El Niño is expected to rise to over 70 in the next three months despite the reported weakening of the phenomenon.

"Meron pa ring mga probinsiya na maaapektuhan (There are still provinces that will be affected)," Task Force El Niño Spokesperson and Presidential Communications Office Assistant Secretary

Joey Villarama said in a Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon interview Wednesday.

"In fact, doon sa projection ng PAGASA ay tataas pa mga to mid-70s, mga 76 pa po ang puwedeng maapektuhan na probinsiya in varying degrees in the next three months (In fact, according to PAGASA's [Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astro-

nomic Services Administration] projection, the number of affected provinces will increase to the mid-70s, about 76 provinces may be affected in varying degrees in the next three months)," he added.

Currently, 67 provinces across eight regions – Regions 1 (Ilocos Region), 2 (Cagayan Valley), 3 (Central Luzon), 4-A (Calabarzon), 4-B (Mimaropa), 6 (Central Luzon), 9 (Zam-

boanga Peninsula) and 12 (Soccsksargen) – are being affected by the phenomenon, 30 of which are experiencing drought.

The Department of Agriculture earlier reported that the total damage of El Niño to the agriculture sector has reached P1.75 billion.

The weather bureau said El Niño may continue to weaken until the March-April-May season. PNA



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SOLAR FARM. Around 150 coffee farmers in Talakag, Bukidnon receive a much-needed boost for their livelihood through One Meralco Foundation (OMF), the social development arm of Manila Electric Company (Meralco), after it energized its post-harvest coffee bean processing facility using solar power. The coffee farmers are now benefitting from the 5-kilowatt solar photovoltaic (PV) system that was turned over to the Milalitra Farmers Agriculture Cooperative (MILFACO).



Absence of a science-based culture

OUR policymakers, particularly the members of Congress, wont pass legislation without a thorough analysis of the budgetary implications.

Take for example the revised Centenarian Act of 2016, which stipulates that P10,000 in cash be given to Filipino citizens who reach the age of 80, with another P10,000 every five years thereafter until the age of 95. Upon reaching 100, the centenarian will receive P100,000.

First, there is no study as to who among our people reach that ripe age. I would hazard a guess that most come from well-off families because these are the ones who can afford regular medical check-ups and expensive maintenance



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POINTS

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medicine. They can also indulge in sports and join gyms, play sports such as tennis or golf, bike or run and hike. The poor, on the other hand, do not have enough money to pay for medical checkups, maintenance medicines and sports activities.

In other words, the main beneficiaries of the new act are senior citizens who come from well-off families or have children who are professionally successful and hence can easily defray the costs

of medicines and sports activities.

In addition, there has been no analysis rendered on its implications on the country's fiscal position. It is estimated that around P3.1 billion will be needed for this purpose. Do we have enough of a budget to fully finance the populist law? Where will we get the money?

Another law being introduced in Congress calls for lowering the retirement age to 56 or 57 sans any analysis of the fiscal implications. In addition, PhilHealth is proposing a hefty increase in its medical support to breast cancer patients when it cannot even fully pay the debt it owes to hospitals and medical doctors.

And what about the Senate proposal to increase the mini-

mum wage by P100 per day? (The House's version is higher). Did this benefit from any economic and financial analysis on the overall impact on the economy?

The above cases glaringly illustrate that policy or decision-making in this country is hardly based on scientific studies. This is in sharp contrast to the experience of developed countries and is probably the major reason why we have not attained developed economy status.

In developed economies, a politician or top government official cannot introduce reform laws or measures without showing their positive fiscal and welfare implications. Solid evidence based on

►Finer B2

■ FINER FROM B1

Absence

scientific studies will have to be presented to justify passage of the reform measure.

Notice that during debates between a Republican and a Democratic presidential candidate in the United States, or Conservative and Labor candidates in the United Kingdom, the foremost question raised whenever a candidate promises to increase welfare spending is where they will get the money, or what additional tax measures will be imposed to meet the resource requirements of the promises.

This is a manifestation of the political maturity of the candidates and voters. They rely on scientific studies on what can be achieved given limited resources. They demand specifics as to how many resources will be needed and how these will be raised to fulfill their campaign promise.

We unfortunately do not have the benefit of a science-based culture. Even in the field of economic governance, we see a disjuncture among our economic, monetary

and fiscal policies due to our reliance on gut feel and populist decision-making.

For instance, there are too many "ayuda" (handout) programs without regard to their fiscal and economic implications. The plethora of "ayudas" involves significant government expenditures, and we are not told how extra revenues will be generated to fund them. This can lead to wider budget deficits and eventually economic bankruptcy.

The rule of the populist government of Juan Peron of Argentina (1946-1952) is instructive. Peron poured massive amounts of money to build impressive public works, fund a complex set of social welfare programs and forced companies to increase salaries paid to their workers.

His government was also known for its dictatorial tendencies as it incarcerated thousands of dissidents, many of whom were killed. The press was censored or strictly controlled. Argentina also became a refuge for key Nazi officers trying to escape prosecution by the victorious Allied Forces.

While Peron became popular with the Argentinian masses, his

rule led to the collapse of the Argentinian economy due to massive budgetary deficits. Inevitably, a coup threw him out of power because runaway inflation caused widespread suffering.

We are now seeing the initial result of gut-feel and populist decision-making by our policymakers as national government debt has ballooned from close to P12 trillion in 2021 to more than P14 trillion in 2023 — a span of just two years.

If the government maintains its "ayuda" mentality, we will end up incurring more debt this year. There are predictions that it will worsen the following year because of a spending binge that is expected to happen due to elections.

Without someone in the government playing the task of a "bastonero" (band leader) aligning our economic, monetary and fiscal policies, the future does not seem to bode well for "Bagong Pilipinas."

I hope that Special Assistant for Investments and Economic Affairs Frederick Go can play this role more actively to avert the threat of a serious fiscal imbalance for the country in the very near future.



Editorial

Road map points the way to PH coffee industry comeback

COFFEE is among the most traded food commodities in the world. More than 9 billion kilograms of coffee is produced annually worldwide.

Brazil has for decades been the biggest coffee producer. In 2023, it turned out 3,558,000 metric tons (MT) annually, or about a third of the global output, according to the Eleven Coffees website.

Vietnam is a far second, with 1,830,000 MT.

Further down the list, at No. 24, is the Philippines, producing 27,000 MT, or a mere 0.2 percent of the world's coffee production. That is lamentable, because in the early 1900s, we were the fourth-biggest coffee producer.

Coffee production and consumption have a long history in the Philippines. The first coffee plants were introduced by the Spanish colonizers in the 17th century. By the early 19th century, coffee had become a major export commodity of the Philippines, second only to tobacco.

Today, Indonesia, Thailand and even Laos outrank us in the coffee hierarchy in Southeast Asia.

Philippine coffee production is falling by 3.5 percent annually over the past 10 years, according to government figures. Ironically, the decline comes at a time that the country's coffee consumption has been growing.

Filipinos love coffee. We drink coffee during breakfast and when we go out with friends. But the boom in the coffee market is driven mainly by the proliferation of coffee shops, which double as trendy social hubs for young urban professionals.

To meet the rising demand, coffee processors have to import 81 percent of their coffee requirements. That leaves many coffee growers in the lurch.

Majority of the coffee farms are between 1 and 2 hectares, too small to meet commercial-scale orders.

The Philippine Coffee Board Inc. (PCBI), the organization of coffee farmers, said they can only come up with 30,000 MT of coffee beans a year, way below the local demand of 150,000 MT.

"What's disheartening is that many want to process, but there's not enough production," says PCBI Director Alejandro Mojica.

One of the biggest problems confronting coffee producers is the lack of seedlings, Mojica said. "The first thing we observed in order to address production is the need to meet the demand for seedlings. And the solution we see is for each region to have its own nurseries and promote it to the farmers."

Building regional nurseries will not be cheap. "The government has to spend P600 million a year in 10 years to get to self-sufficiency, but those are very conservative figures, you can do maybe more than 1,000 seedlings per hectare," says Pacita Juan, PCBI president and co-chairman.

The government has long recognized the struggles of the coffee industry and has made serious efforts to address them. Under Republic Act 7900, or the "High Value Crops Development Act," coffee is a high-value crop that qualifies for government support in production, processing, marketing and distribution.

A more comprehensive strategy is laid out in the Philippine Coffee Industry road map 2017-2022, which was approved by the previous Duterte administration.

The road map aims to raise the country's annual coffee output from 37,000 MT a year to 214,626 MT by 2022, boosting its coffee self-sufficiency level to 161 percent from a low 41.6 percent.

The road map guides stakeholders and government agencies in the "pursuit of inclusive growth models through value chain approach and to sustain increases in yields, incomes, improved farm productivity, as well as to enhance farmers' technical capability and skills ..."

Recent developments in the coffee industry — including heavy losses sustained during the Covid-19 pandemic — prompted the government to revise the road map in midstream. This time, the Departments of Agriculture, Science and Technology, and Trade and Industry worked together to establish specific timelines for achieving targets.

For the short-term phase from 2021 to 2025, the goal is to increase promotion on patronizing local coffee products. During the medium term (2026-2030), the focus is to help local processors to develop products that can compete in the international market.

The long-term goal (2031-2040) is to set up an online industry information database that can be easily accessed by the stakeholders.

The updated road map took into account other serious concerns facing the coffee industry, including low productivity and soil fertility, limited skills and technical know-how, and lack of postharvest facilities.

A Philippine Coffee Council will oversee the road map's implementation, its members drawn from regional and provincial coffee councils.

If the country's coffee industry is to stage a comeback, the government must be committed to support the stakeholders all the way.



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Growing things for fun and profit after the pandemic

I was asked to give a talk on urban farming at the National Center for Mental Health's Livelihood Ideas for Financial Empowerment program in celebration of Women's Month. Here's a condensed version of my speech:

The pandemic showed us that food security is important. We saw how borders were quick to lock down and how, because mass transportation came to a halt, it was suddenly difficult to acquire even the most basic pantry items. And because people suddenly had a lot of time on their hands, farming and gardening became popular. Encouraged by the Department of Agriculture, people began to grow vegetables at home while others turned to gardening to ease the stress of the pandemic. Many realized that they actually had a green thumb. Ornamental plant prices soared. Words were even invented for these newfound plant enthusiasts: plantitos and plantitas.

All of this feels like the distant past, even though it only happened four years ago. Now

it seems that people have forgotten about the importance of securing our food as a nation. Folks are so keen to go back to the "old ways" that they have disregarded the lessons that the pandemic tried to teach us: that we cannot survive on imports alone. But for some people, it unlocked an idea: that it can be possible to grow your own food, and maybe make money from it as well.

After interviewing so many farmers, gardeners, and agripreneurs, I've come to realize many things that successful agri-business owners have in common.

First, they like what they do. No matter what the field, it's difficult (but not impossible) to succeed if one is not interested in what one is doing. So if one has idle land and wants to start a business growing vegetables or ornamental plants, they have to like growing vegetables or ornamental plants because



AVANT
GARDENER
YVETTE TAN

it's what they will be spending a lot of time on.

They work hard. Hands-on business owners will tell you that they work more than their employees, but that they also earn more. And if they're lucky, they also love what they do. Farming happens to be a venture that needs supervision. There are constant threats of pests, disease, natural disasters, theft, and so on. Farm owners who think they can leave their farm to a random farmhand find out the hard way that this is a big mistake.

They run their farms and gardens like the businesses that they are. It's a common misconception that the Philippines is so fertile that farming is easy. If this were true, our agriculture industry wouldn't be the struggling behemoth that it is. If one wants to make money from farming, they have to be prepared to treat it like a business. They have to figure out if there's going to be a market for what they want to sell, and if there isn't, they have to figure out if they want to go ahead and sell it anyway (which will involve educating the market) or if they want to switch products.

They are willing to pivot and innovate. Many successful small diversified farms, as their name says, don't just sell one crop. Neither do they just sell raw materials. Sometimes they make products out of their harvests, which they can sell at a premium and also usually have longer shelf lives. Anyone who's played a farming game knows that making products from

one's harvests will add to the income of one's farm.

They are savvy marketers and take advantage of current technology. One of the best money making stories I've heard involves just two things: a smartphone and access to a plant store. A plant store owner told me about how a lady would post about plants for sale on her social media account, but she'd post plants from the owner's store and add a few pesos so she'd earn an income. Once a plant was sold, she'd buy the plant from the owner's store and ship it to the customer. The store owner didn't mind this because the lady was upfront about it and at the end of the day, a sale is a sale.

Other farmers use social media to familiarize people with what goes on in their farm, so that clients are invested in the farmer's journey as well as in the goods that they sell. A young farmer wanted to grow hydroponic lettuce in her province. She did some market research before building a simple hydroponic setup in a small part of her parents' farmland. She posted about the entire process from the beginning, so that by the time her first harvest arrived, it was sold out. She also made it a point to deliver everything herself to ensure customer satisfaction.

There can be money in farming and gardening, as long as one treats it like a business. But like any business, there's also a chance of a venture not succeeding. But as long as one is strategic, there's always a good chance for success.



El Niño seen to impact agri, growth entire year

By REINE JUVIERRE ALBERTO

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WITH the looming threats of El Niño seen to affect agriculture output, former Socioeconomic and Planning Secretary Cielito F. Habito said this situation could extend throughout the year, denting the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024.

At the Ateneo Eagle Watch's economic briefing on Thursday, Habito said El Niño will "definitely" affect the agricultural output of the country, thereby slowing down the

growth of the agriculture sector.

The agriculture sector posted a growth of 1.2 percent in 2023, 0.5 percent higher than the previous year, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

"The effect of El Niño in agriculture can still permeate through the performance of industries and services because of the agri-based nature of much of our manufacturing [sector]," said Habito, who served as the National Economic and Development Authority's (Neda) director general during the Ramos administration.

Habito added that agriculture

only contributes 9.8 percent of the GDP, which he noted is "not that much," but El Niño's effects on agriculture could impact industries and services.

Since 50 percent of manufacturing is accounted for by food manufacturing, Habito said this segment could also be affected since food comes from agriculture.

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said in its latest discussion paper that higher temperatures brought by climate change will significantly reduce the country's GDP growth.

SEE "EL NIÑO," A2

El Niño could reduce GDP growth by 0.47 percentage points (ppts) while hotter temperatures could reduce manufacturing output by 1.8 ppts and service growth by 0.7 percent. (See: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2024/03/15/higher-temperatures-to-cut-gdp-growth-bsp-report/>).

Meanwhile, Finance Secretary Ralph G. Recto said earlier this year that the Development Budget Coordination Committee is discussing the possibility of coming up with "more realistic targets," specifically on the country's GDP. The DBCC is set to meet today, March 22.

The GDP growth for 2024 is pegged to be at 6.5 percent to 8 percent, as indicated in the medium-term fiscal framework (MTFF). In December 2024, the DBCC reduced the GDP from 6.5 percent to 7.5 percent.

"I am skeptical about the 6.5 percent to 7.5 percent. To me, it's understandable. There are some realistic elements that we must take into account," the former Neda chief said.

"[El Niño] will have a dampening effect, clearly, but it's hard to quantify it without any clear basis for cutting growth," Habito added.

For the Philippines to deal with the supply shocks, Habito said measures to mitigate El Niño damage should be put into place.

This cropping season, Habito recommended deliberately shifting away from water-intensive and drought-vulnerable crops like rice and sugarcane, and substituting water-efficient ones like legumes, such as mungo, and corn.

"We know it is coming, or already here, and most measures to soften its adverse impact are well known. Everyone simply has to be part of the solution through prudent water use," Habito noted.



Czech Republic says keen on exporting farm, food items, training PHL farmers

BY ANDREA E. SAN JUAN
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THE Czech Republic wants to export agricultural and food products such as dairy and meat to the Philippines as well as provide "know-how" to help train Filipino farmers.

"We see a huge potential not only in the imports from Czech Republic to the Philippines but also in the other direction," Marek Výborný, Minister of Agriculture for Czech Republic said at a briefing in Makati City on Thursday.

"So when it comes to agriculture and food industry, what we can of-

fer are for example, meat products, but also things like genetic material of breeding cattle and also dairy production, or what is suitable to transport in such a huge distance," Czech agriculture chief noted.

At the business delegation between the Czech Republic and the Philippines, Výborný said in terms of livestock commodities, the European country has "excellent results," such as in milk production and milkyields.

In fact, he noted, "The Czech Republic's yield is among the world's best and we're actually the third amongst the EU member states."

The Agriculture minister high-

lighted that the European country is "especially famous for the exports of durable dairy and meat products confectionery and bakery products and food preparation, as well as for the exports over quality livestock for breeding purposes and also their genetic material."

At least 25 Czech companies flocked to the Philippines for a six-day business delegation. These firms belong to different areas such as beverage, butchery, dairy, vegetable breeding, transport and warehousing, odor repellents against animals, insurance for export and investment credits, poultry breeding,

production of medicinal products, water management, recruitment, brewery, education, among others.

Apart from agricultural products, Výborný said the European country is also "ready to provide know-how and expertise to help train your farmers."

In the labor aspect, the Agriculture minister said that Czech has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, which he said is about 3 percent. With this, his country is offering thousands of jobs within its food industry.

He then noted that this is a potential area for mutual cooperation "because we can offer jobs to your

people and your people can then transfer the know-how back to the country."

"And I'd like to stress that the positions for the jobs that we're offering are not only in primary production; it's not just about blue collar workers, but also speaking about positions in management of farms," said Výborný.

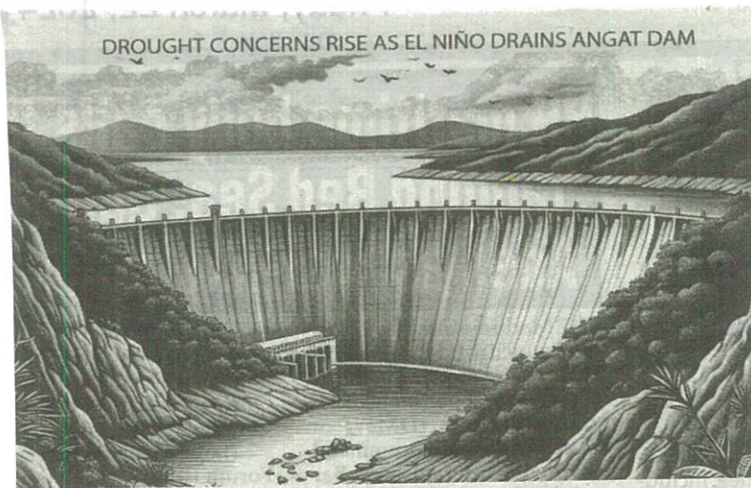
The Agriculture minister added, "I've repeatedly heard highly positive feedback from the Czech farms and Czech food industry speaking about Filipino workers."

It is worth noting that one of the 25 Czech firms that flocked to Manila for a business delegation is Clever

Advisor s.r.o. which has a company description that says, "From identifying suitable candidates to navigating the intricacies of visas and work permits, we provide a complete solution for hiring workers from abroad."

Also one of the participating Czech firms is the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU), a university of agricultural education and research, based on the delegation brochure.

Data from Tradeline Philippines, an export data and service portal, showed that total trade between the Philippines and Czech Republic amounted to \$396.31 million in 2023.



DROUGHT CONCERNS RISE AS EL NIÑO DRAINS ANGAT DAM

EDITORIAL

El Niño's effects

THE catastrophic effects of the El Niño phenomenon in the Philippines continue to worry government authorities and the general public.

Although the taps at home in the metropolis will not dry up as the summer peaks next month, the pressure level will be much lower.

It's because the supply allocation from Angat Dam will be reduced by mid-April.

The National Water Resources Board was reported as saying that allocation from Angat might be changed depending on the water level there.

Thus, it may be useful, then, for the people, particularly those in Metropolitan Manila, to conserve water owing to the depleting of Angat Dam.

We share the view of many that there's that urgent need to preserve water from Angat to get through the summer months.

"Dapat magtipid tayo ng tubig dahil hindi natin alam kung may mga ulan na pagdating ng Hunyo," a worried housewife said.

Angat Dam supplies 90 percent of the potable water requirements in the heavily-populated metropolis and nearby provinces.

Located in Norzagaray, Bulacan the dam likewise irrigates close to 30,000 hectares of farmlands in Bulacan and Pampanga.

We have to take now -- and fast.



Soybeans, wheat climb

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybeans rose for a second session on Thursday to hit a two-month high, as excessive rains in Argentina raised worries over supplies and triggered short covering.

Wheat rose for a third session in four and corn bounced back.

"Beans seem to be the main driver at the moment because of Argentina's storms," said Andrey Sizov, managing director at agricultural consultancy SovEcon.

"The funds were already in

short-covering mode and the weather disruption seemed to speed things up substantially. Looks like some funds were caught off guard."

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was up 0.9 percent at \$12.20-3/4 a bushel, after climbing to its highest since Jan. 26 at \$12.26-3/4 a bushel, earlier in the session.

Wheat gained 1 percent to \$5.50-1/2 a bushel and corn climbed 1.3 percent to \$4.44-3/4 a bushel. - *Reuters*