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## Unmask NFA exec blocking documents - Laurel

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. is trying to unmask the official of the National Food Authority (NFA) who was allegedly blocking the release of documents to the Office of the Ombudsman.

During the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing yesterday, Department of Agriculture (DA) spokesman Arnel de Mesa said that Laurel has directed NFA officer-in-charge Larry Lacson to cooperate with the ombudsman.

On Thursday, Ombudsman Samuel Martires said there was an alleged attempt to suppress some documents that would be relevant in the ongoing investigation on the alleged anomalous sale of NFA rice to some traders.

Martires said his "asset" in the NFA told him that a certain official of the agency gave an instruction not to release documents to om-

budsman investigators.

De Mesa gave assurance that Laurel has directed Lacson to ensure that all documents will be given to the ombudsman.

At the same time, De Mesa denied that there were efforts to conceal documents from the ombudsman.

For his part, Lacson said that as far as his office is concerned, he was not aware of any pending requests from the ombudsman.

However, he is willing to sit down with Martires so they can provide what they need.

"I talked to the Office of the Ombudsman just now, they will provide me with the list of what they need and we will comply immediately," Lacson added.

Lacson is a former director of the Bureau of Plant Industry, an attached agency of the DA. - **Bella Cariaso**



## DA orders change of command at NFA warehouses

By Joel dela Torre

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has ordered the transfer of authority of suspended warehousemen of the National Food Authority to their deputies to facilitate the reopening of closed NFA warehouses.

DA Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr. explained that the reopening of padlocked warehouses would greatly help normalize operations of the grains

agency, which he said, has started to procure palay from farmers.

Around 99 NFA warehouses remained closed after the Ombudsman suspended 141 NFA managers and employees amid allegations of anomalous sale of rice buffer stocks.

Recently, the Ombudsman lifted the suspension of two dozen NFA employees since

imposing the preventive suspension on March 4.

"We will ensure that all padlocked warehouses will be opened soonest to optimize the impact of NFA's procurement activities on rice farmers' income as well as secure the maximum volume of palay for buffer stocking," the agri chief said.

Laurel also chairs the NFA Council.



AS CLOSE AS 100 METERS

## CHINESE VESSEL AGAIN TRIES TO BLOCK PH RESEARCH VESSEL

By **Nestor Corrales**  
@NCorralesINQ

A China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel again made “dangerous maneuvers” on Thursday and tried to block a Philippine fishery vessel carrying marine scientists conducting research in the West Philippine Sea.

Commodore Jay Tarriela, Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea, told a press briefing on Friday that CCG vessel 5204 crossed the path of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources’ (BFAR) BRP Datu Sanday, coming as close as 100 meters.

Tarriela said at least 13 Chinese maritime militia vessels were in the vicinity during the blocking maneuver. He added a People’s Liberation Army Navy helicopter was also seen in the area.

The BRP Datu Sanday and

the BRP Pagbuaya, escorted by PCG vessels, left Pag-asa Island at about 10 a.m. on Thursday.

The vessels carrying Filipino marine scientists were en route to Pag-asa Cays 1 and 2 (also known as Sandy Cay), two of the sandbars situated within the 22-kilometer territorial sea of Pag-asa Island in the West Philippine Sea.

According to Tarriela, the CCG vessel 5204 sounded a siren for more than 30 minutes to call the attention of the Chinese maritime militia vessels “to support her actions in preventing the BFAR vessels and our marine scientists onboard a rigid hull inflatable boats” to reach Pag-asa Cays 1 and 2.

Despite dangerous maneuvers by the Chinese vessel, he said those manning the Philippine ships were “able to deal with them professionally” and reached the sandbars at 2 p.m. on Thursday.

He also refuted China’s claims that their coast guard was able to prevent the Philippine vessels from completing its marine scientific research in the West Philippine Sea.

### Successful mission

“That’s another lie. Contrary to China’s claims, the Filipino marine scientist successfully conducted more than four hours of extensive coral reef and fishery resources assessment, despite the illegal presence of CCG vessel 5204, which came as close as 100 meters to the BFAR vessel,” Tarriela said.

He pointed out the BFAR and PCG’s actions in conducting marine scientific research in the West Philippine Sea “are fully in accordance” with the provisions of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

He said the cays and their surrounding waters, which are

within the territorial sea of Pag-asa Island, form part of the Philippine national territory.

“The presence of the CCG and Chinese maritime militia vessels in the area is a clear infringement of the Philippines’ territorial sovereignty,” he said.

In the same press briefing, Dr. Jonathan Anticamara, the marine scientist who was part of the research team, said they also found “piles of rubble” at Sandy Cay.

“We don’t know who put it there. Many of these piles of rubble are not the same as those underwater, and we need further observation in the laboratory,” he said.

Tarriela added that the BFAR and PCG are “committed to upholding the rule of law and will continue to protect the rights and interests of the Philippines in accordance with international law.” INQ



## DA road maps collecting dust

If road maps are not done well, or not done at all, the reality desired will never happen. And even if the road maps are good, without the corresponding necessary budgets, the rhetoric will not result in reality.

This is a perennial problem at the Department of Agriculture (DA). There were subsector road maps previously, but they did not have a common outline. The biggest hole was the lack of private sector participation. Thus they remained unused, merely sitting on the shelf.

Using samples from these and from the Department of Trade and Industry, Alyansa Agrikultura submitted a common road map outline for the DA's consideration. While the DA officially approved this, a critical

outline component was not implemented.

What was this? A requirement listing key priority actions for the next two years with the appropriate budgets to put the road map into action. In addition, the recommended public-private road map implementation team was not actualized.

### Budget

There are now 21 DA-approved subsector road maps: nine for high-value crops; seven for poultry, livestock and corn; and five for fisheries. The current budget of the DA did not consider these road maps because they had not been approved when the budget was being formulated.

The current leadership is set to change the situation. The

need for a working road map has recently been highlighted, specifically in the salt industry. The March 20 Inquirer editorial stated: "It is almost criminal that the Philippines imports some 92 percent of its annual salt requirement, despite having more than 36,000 kilometers of shoreline and access to abundant saltwater."

Last March 11, President Marcos signed a law mandating a Philippine Salt Industry Development Roadmap. But rather than just identifying general directions, this law stipulated that

## COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

necessary budgets must be accommodated.

Half of the salt fund must be earmarked for projects such as machinery and equipment, with 40 percent going to salt farm warehouses and storage areas, and 5 percent each for extension and technology.

This budget component is absent in the DA's 21 road maps. In identifying urgent priorities and low-lying fruits at least in the short term, this must be highlighted in the 2025 funds.

### Point persons

The DA had previously conducted a two-day national agriculture summit that produced excellent recommendations. When asked if the proposed budget would be modified to cover such recommendations,

the answer was in the negative. It further showed the disconnect between planning and budgeting.

Last March 19, the DA said there would be two focal persons to help ensure that the blueprints would be tweaked and aligned with the budget. A DA assistant secretary will take charge of the road maps, ensuring their completion, improvement and specification of action priorities and corresponding budgets.

Assisting him will be a representative from the private sector. He has been identified by organizations from the agribusiness, farmers and fisherfolk, academe and science sectors. He will help ensure private sector participation and commitment.

The private sector must be responsible for agriculture development, with the guidance and support of the government. This may even result in improved modifications to this year's budget implementation.

There is plenty of time left before the year's end.

For crops, the road maps should cover: rice, coconut, banana, coffee, cacao, mango, abaca, onion and vegetables. For poultry, livestock and corn: poultry broiler, poultry raiser, hogs, dairy, carabao, small ruminants and corn. For fisheries: milkfish, tilapia, shrimps, shellfish and seaweeds.

With a complete plan and corresponding budget, our rhetoric could finally become reality. INQ



## DA sees spike in fish, vegetables prices this Lent

By **BELLA CARIASO**

A spike in the retail prices of fish and vegetables is expected during the Holy Week, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said yesterday, even as he assured consumers that there will be enough supply of food commodities.

During the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, De Mesa said many Filipinos prefer not to eat meat during Lent, causing movement in the cost of fish and vegetables.

"With the commemoration of

the Holy Week, it is natural that the retail prices of vegetables and fish go up, especially fish, because many of us observe fasting," De Mesa said.

The official said the DA expects an increase in the retail price of fish between 10 and 20 percent.

De Mesa gave assurance that there is ample supply of fish with the end of the closed fishing season.

"The supply of fish has increased after the closed fishing season," he added.

At the same time, De Mesa said that the production of vegetables

also increased.

"We have a good harvest of vegetables, especially lowland vegetables, like pinakbet as well as highland vegetables from Benguet and other highland areas," he said.

Based on monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of milkfish ranged between P150 and P220 per kilo; tilapia, between P120 and P160 per kilo; local and imported round scud, between P180 and P200 per kilo and Indian mackerel, between P280 and P350 per kilo.

# REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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## Mga bodega ng NFA 'di dapat isara

**KINUWESTIYON** ni Ombudsman Samuel Martires ang pagsasara ng mga warehouse ng National Food Authority sa gitna ng nagpapatuloy na imbestigasyon sa umano'y iregularidad sa pagbebenta ng rice buffer stock.

Sinabi ni Martires na hindi kailangang magsara ang warehouses dahil maaring sa Ombudsman ipasa ang sisi at hindi aniya patas iyon.

Matatandaan na una ng sinuspinde ng Ombudsman ang 100 opisyal at empleyado ng NFA bilang bahagi ng imbestigasyon nito sa naturang isyu.

Gayunman, binawi ng Ombudsman ang 6 na buwang suspensyon ng 23 empleyado ng NFA matapos mapatunayang walang kinalaman ang mga ito sa kontrobersiya.

Samantala, iniutos na ng Department of Agriculture na apurahin ang pagbubukas ng mga isinarang warehouse para masiguro ang patuloy na operasyon ng ahensiya at aktibidad ng pagbili ng palay.

**TERESA TAVARES**



## March inflation may pick up amid high food prices

By KEISHA TA-ASAN

Inflation likely accelerated for the second straight month in March, mainly driven by high rice prices, prompting the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) to keep borrowing costs unchanged at its next policy review in April, analysts said.

This developed as Finance Secretary and Monetary Board member Ralph Recto warned that inflation would remain bumpy and likely to breach the central bank's two to four percent target range at some point.

Economist Makoto Tsuchiya of Oxford Economics said headline inflation may pick up to 3.5 percent in March from February's 3.4 percent due to unfavorable base effects.

"Possible upside risks to our forecast include higher food prices including rice whose price remains elevated, as well as meat which shows a rising trend," he said.

BSP Governor Eli Remolona Jr. said inflation would likely quicken to 3.9 percent in March. If realized, it would mark the second straight month that inflation went up on a monthly basis.

Still, inflation would be significantly lower than the 7.6 percent last year. It would also be the fourth straight month that the consumer price index (CPI) stayed within the central bank's two to four percent target.

However, National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said inflation would likely slow down in March, especially as the proposed minimum wage adjustments have yet to be enacted into law.

"We think the BSP will remain on hold at the April meeting, given the inflation path remains volatile and risks are tilted to the upside. The first cut will likely come in June, after the US Fed starts to cut and there's more assurance on the steady disinflation path," Tsuchiya said.

Turn to B5

### March inflation... From B1

The Monetary Board has kept interest rates on hold after a 25-basis-point, off-cycle hike in October 2023. The central bank has tightened borrowing costs by 450 basis points between May 2022 and October 2023, bringing the key rate to a near 17-year high of 6.50 percent.

Security Bank chief economist Robert Dan Roces said inflation may likely breach the two to four percent target in the second quarter, as earlier telegraphed by the BSP, due to upward pressures such as rising energy prices, supply chain issues and possible wage-price spirals.

"The Monetary Board will dissect the data in April, considering underlying trends and external pressures. Public inflation expectations and the

need to balance price stability with economic growth will also be on their radar," Roces said in a Viber message.

The second monetary policy setting of the BSP Monetary Board for this year has been moved to April 8 from April 4.

ING Bank Manila senior economist Nicholas Mapa also believes inflation could be higher in March.

"March could still likely see high inflation for important items such as rice while transport related prices and electricity could also contribute to inflation close to the upper bound of BSP's inflation target," he said.

On the sidelines of the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines induction of officers on Thursday, Recto maintained that he is

expecting a bumpy road ahead for inflation.

Recto shares Remolona's expectation that the headline rate may have jumped to 3.9 percent in March, closing in to the upper end of the target band.

The DOF chief also did not discount the likelihood of inflation breaching four percent in the coming months.

"There's always that possibility but for the year, it will still be within the two to four percent. It's going to be a bumpy road. It may breach [four percent] but it will still go back to target," Recto told reporters.

Nonetheless, the Finance chief expects interest rates will be higher for longer as inflation remains

elevated.

"Remember that you still have disruptions in the supply chain because of geopolitical tensions. There's reshoring, onshoring, refiguring out the supply chains globally so inflation will be higher for longer," Recto said.

As such, Recto emphasized that a rate cut can still be expected but probably less than what was initially projected.

He said two adjustments could be penciled in for 25 basis points each as the market is initially expecting up to four rate cuts this year for a total of 100 basis points.

"Both less in magnitude and frequency," Recto said.

- With Louise Maureen Simeon





# 29.4K farmers, fishermen suffer from El Niño onslaught

A total of 29,409 farmers and fishermen in six regions across the country have been affected by the El Niño weather phenomenon, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) reported Friday.

Of the figure, 18,039 are in Western Visayas; 6,323 in Cagayan Valley; 2,613 in Mimaropa; 2,015 in the Ilocos Region; 397 in Calabarzon; and 22 in Zamboanga Peninsula.

Meanwhile, the affected crop area has reached 26,713.4 hectares, with 13,363.39 hectares in Western Visayas; 9,013.29 in Cagayan Valley; 3,116.94 in Mimaropa; 1,026 in the Ilocos Region; 189.56 in Cala-



barzon; and 22.22 hectares in Zamboanga Peninsula.

Of the total, 23,916.37 hectares have a chance of recovery, or classified as "partially damaged," while 2,815.03 hect-

ares were "totally damaged" by El Niño, according to the NDRRMC.

Agriculture damage in all six regions was estimated at P1.23 billion, it added. PNA