

Water conservation advisory issued after unusually low Angat levels

THE National Water Resources Board (NWRB) issued an advisory to “conserve water whenever” after lower-than-usual levels at Angat Dam in Bulacan, the main source of water for Metro Manila.

On Dec. 31, water elevation at the dam was 202.80 meters, significantly below the 212 meters considered normal for the time of year.

While rainfall from typhoons can recharge dams, water levels rose only

slightly with the northeast monsoon, which caused the dam to fall short of the ideal year-end elevation, the NWRB said in a statement.

“*Kailangan natin mabigyan ng kasisiguruhan ang tubig natin, partikular po na itong panahon ng tag-init, kagaya ng summer, na wala masyadong tag-ulan* (We need to ensure the availability of water, particularly with the incoming dry season when we can expect little

to no rain),” NWRB Executive Director Sevillo D. David said in a separate radio-TV interview.

“PAGASA forecast that the ‘La Niña’ phenomenon, which started in October, will persist until March,” the NWRB said in a statement. “Rainfall could be enhanced by the northeast monsoon... which could provide more precipitation. This may bring rainfall to the Angat watershed.”

According to projections by the NWRB, if water usage and weather conditions continue on trend, water levels at the dam may hit the critical level of 180 meters as soon as April.

“*Mas maganda po na paghandaan natin ito, at maganda na ngayon pa lang magtipid na tayo ng tubig* (It would be best if we prepare ahead by saving water),” Mr. David said. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

Typhoon inflicts damage on 181 water districts

THE Local Water Utilities Administration (LWUA) said 181 water districts in the Visayas and Mindanao reported serious damage to their facilities as a result of Typhoon Odette (international name: Rai).

The LWUA has dispatched six teams of engineers to the affected districts, it said in a statement.

“We had to physically send our people there because these water districts were so severely damaged and remain without communication lines until now,” LWUA Administrator Gwiling A. Mamondiong said.

The agency said it will be assessing the extent of damage and cost to repair water infrastructure. It will also purchase water treatment facilities for stationing in Davao, Tacloban, Cagayan de Oro, and other cities.

These facilities can “quickly produce and augment water supply because they can recycle flood water into a purified, potable state,” Mr. Mamondiong said.

“This is our best response as of this time, given the situation. Once the water passes through the filters and treatment, it is totally safe to drink, even murky flood water,” he added.

Agricultural damage caused by the typhoon is now estimated at P10.7 billion, with the volume of lost production reckoned at 244,924 metric tons, according to the Department of Agriculture.

The typhoon affected 163,760 farmers and fishermen across 370,142 hectares of agricultural production areas.

Crop losses were reported in the Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Bicol, Western Visayas, Central Visayas, Eastern Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Mindanao, Davao, Soccsksargen, and Caraga regions. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

Foreign chambers OK open-pit ban end

By **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

THE Joint Foreign Chambers (JFC) of the Philippines said the government’s decision to rescind the ban on open-pit mining has been “a long time coming” and will encourage more investment.

The JFC said in a statement that it “welcomed the terms and conditions set by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) for open-pit mining operations to ensure these will be environmentally and socially sustainable.”

“It’s been a long time coming and overdue. Metallic mining can be a major boost to the economy, particularly in rural areas in terms of employment and income,” Canadian Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines President Julian H. Payne said in a phone interview.

“It’s one of the areas that you can get a significant increase in gross domestic product (GDP) over the long term. It’s not a quick fix, but in the long run, it has huge potential,” he added.

The DENR lifted the four-year ban on open mining, which superseded an order issued by the late Secretary Regina L. Lopez in 2017.



ARTHUR/IDEEN-FREPIK

Open-pit mining allegedly results in negative impacts on the environment, such as erosion and the leak of chemicals such as cyanide into surrounding water systems.

“Everybody recognizes that there can be a deleterious impact if it is not conducted and operated in a socially and environmentally responsible way, which in many countries it is, notably in Canada and Australia,” Mr. Payne said.

“Mining is not necessarily a disadvantage to the environment; in fact, in some cases it actually improves it.”

“I think the assumption that open-pit mining inevitably leads to a deteriorated environment is incorrect. It may or may not, it depends on how it is managed. It can be socially and environmentally responsible, that depends on what conditions the government sets. Whether they are effectively implemented and complied with, that is always an open question,” he added.

Mr. Payne said that the nongovernment sector can help keep illegal miners in check by “keeping an eye on things and bring attention to the government

in cases where there is obvious non-compliance.”

“One cannot say that nongovernment organizations (NGOs) are anti-mining. Some are ideologically anti-mining, but some others are in good faith and serve as a watchdogs to help the government,” he added.

He also said not to be discouraged by mining disasters of the past, as the laws in place are different from now.

“It fails to take into account that mining, like every other industry, evolves in terms of safety practices, as does the government and its regulations. To presume that just because a disaster happened 25 years ago, is going to happen today, presumes that nothing has changed in the technology of mining or in the regulatory competence of the government,” Mr. Payne said.

The JFC is composed of the American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, Australian-New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, Canadian Chamber of Commerce, European Chamber of Commerce, Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Korean Chamber of Commerce and the Philippine Association of Multinational Companies Regional Headquarters, Inc.

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Meralco sees Luzon peak power demand at 12,387 MW in May

THE Manila Electric Co. (Meralco) said its forecast for peak power demand on the Luzon grid this year is 12,387 megawatts (MW), and invited power generators to supply about 170 MW to help the distributor meet dry-season demand.

“Initial forecast is that Luzon will have a peak demand at 12,387 MW expected in May. Actual Luzon peak for 2021 was 11,640 MW,” Meralco said in a Viber message.

The company said its peak demand was 7,808 MW peak in 2021 for its franchise areas. Historically, the dry season makes power prices supplied to households rise between 10% and 40% relative to the cooler months of January and February, Meralco said last year.

BusinessWorld asked the National Grid Corp. to comment, but it had not replied at deadline time.

In September, Energy Undersecretary Felix William B. Fuentes told lawmakers

during budget deliberations that the Luzon grid will have reserves of at least 1,500 MW to ensure no power interruptions during the May elections.

The Energy department has since estimated a thinning in reserves due to strong demand and lack of water to power hydroelectric plants in mid-2022.

Separately, Meralco on Tuesday renewed its invitation to power generation companies for the supply of 170 MW in peaking power for the dry season, for which expressions of interest are due Wednesday, Jan. 5.

A pre-bid conference is scheduled for Jan. 12, with the bid submission deadline set for Feb. 2.

Meralco said in December that the emergency procurement exercise was approved by the Department of Energy. — **Marielle C. Lucenio**

DTI says ‘some’ paracetamol brands may be in short supply; ample stocks from other makers

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said some brands of paracetamol may be experiencing shortages, but added the overall supply is adequate.

“Tight supply for some brands... is due to timing of deliveries to replenish the stocks in the branches of these drugstores,” Trade Secretary Ramon M. Lopez said in a Viber message on Tuesday.

“In particular, popular brands (like) Biogesic or Decolgen, which are (the) paracetamol and analgesics of United Laboratories, Inc. (Unilab), may be having temporary out of stock situations. Their manufacturer had a delivery cut off last December but deliveries started coming this week,” he added.

Mr. Lopez said the supply of other brands and generics is ample.

“Rhea Generics products aren’t affected as much, also because their lines are supplied by major companies. There are other brands of paracetamol in the market so there is no shortage. There are also a lot of generic products in the market,” Mr. Lopez said.

Mr. Lopez said he will ask drugstores to limit per-person quantities for sale to discourage panic-buying.

He also asked consumers to file report profiteers trying to take advantage of the tight supply.

“We will charge them. We also advise consumers (that) they buy from reputable drugstores to ensure

fair prices according to the suggested retail price and not from sari-sari stores,” Mr. Lopez said.

In a separate statement on Tuesday, the Department of Health (DoH) also said it does not consider the supply situation for paracetamol and other drugs for flu-like symptoms to be a shortage.

“(We) would like to assure the public that there is no ongoing shortage in the Philippines. Paracetamol has many generic alternatives in the market, which are available in many drug stores nationwide,” the DoH said.

“We would like to appeal to consumers however to refrain from hoarding, panic-buying, or unnecessary purchases of such medications when not clinically warranted,” it added.

Separately, the DTI’s Mr. Lopez also encouraged self-testing for people going to gatherings.

“If one is not feeling anything or is asymptomatic, one would not have done anyway the reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test for that day. But an antigen test can detect if one is infectious or not for that day and can be preventive,” Mr. Lopez said.

“This is better than no test at all for asymptomatics. We should allow this in drugstores so that people can have voluntary home tests at lower cost. This is on top of the required vaccination,” he added. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**



FREPIK

Farm group estimates volume of smuggled rice at 300M kg in 2020

THE Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) estimated the volume of smuggled rice in 2020 at 300 million kilograms (kg), making it by far the most smuggled food commodity.

SINAG’s estimate for smuggled chicken is 76 million kg, pork 45.5 million kg, onion 23.04 million kg, and assorted vegetables 12 million kg.

The estimates were arrived at using international trade estimates from the United Nations Comtrade database, which contains official totals from exporting countries. These export volumes may then be compared with official Philippine imports data, with any resulting variance assumed to represent smuggling.

“These figures are just mind boggling, eclipsing all previous smuggling numbers. *May kumita at patuloy na kumikita talaga sa gitna ng pandemya* (Some people continue to make money during the pandemic), to the detriment of the local producers, food safety and public health concerns and foregone revenue for the government,” SINAG Chairman Rosendo O. So said in a statement.

“We remain the only country that is not applying the global standard of quarantine inspection at the port of first entry of imported food, food products and agricultural commodities that would ensure food safety and public health during the COVID-19 pandemic (to deter) the unrestrained smuggling

of agri-food products,” Mr. So added.

SINAG also reported that “not a single smuggler has been put to jail despite all the highly publicized anti-smuggling operations.”

SINAG said its proposals to curb smuggling include making public the list of all accredited importers, the weekly publication of prices, and a more rigorous acceptance process for importers.

In the third quarter of 2021, agricultural trade was in deficit by \$2.4 billion, with the growth of imports at 15.8% to \$4.16 billion.

Agricultural imports accounted for 13.5% of overall imports.

SINAG said it opposed the government’s recent policy of allowing more imports of food in recent years.

“This government is brutally unique for having an Agriculture department that architected the wanton increase of imports across all agricultural commodities and arbitrarily reduced the tariff of staples,” it said in a statement.

“There is nothing more tragic for the agriculture sector than to have a government agency mandated to protect local producers doing the exact opposite. Nothing is left for local producers, backyard raisers and small agri-entrepreneurs,” SINAG added. “Future generations will only thrive if protection and support are given to the producers of our agriculture and food systems; there is no other way around it.” — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**