

Agriculture output in Q1 seen flat following typhoon damage, ASF

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION in the first quarter of the year is estimated to have been little changed due to typhoon damage and the continuing impact of the African Swine Fever (ASF) outbreak, analysts said.

Pampanga State Agricultural University professor Roy S. Kempis said “not much” is expected from the agriculture industry in the first quarter. “Flat growth may emerge that will not be far from the growth rate (from the previous quarter),” he said.

He estimates that the value of production in the agriculture sector will remain flat, between minus 0.5% and 0.5%.

The value of production in agriculture in the fourth quarter last year rose by 0.6%. In the first quarter of 2021, output declined by 3.4%. In 2021, agricultural output contracted by 1.7%.

Mr. Kempis said that crops and fisheries will remain a “bright spot” for output in the first quarter, but overall output will remain hampered by the livestock sector due to the resurgence of ASF early in the year.

“This will be driven by crops, fisheries and poultry in the same order of importance. Not much can be contributed from the livestock sector. Instead, it will be the Achilles heel because of ASF and the reluctance of livestock farms to open again soon,” Mr. Kempis said.

As of March 2022, ASF was still active in five regions, nine provinces, seven municipalities, and 12 barangays.

According to the statistics authority, the industry has lost 3 million hogs to the disease or to precautionary culls between 2019 and 2021.

“Livestock is expected to still be struggling. A capital-intensive industry, this will take more time to rebound, perhaps three to five years,” Mr. Kempis added.

He added that a negative outcome can emerge because of agricultural damage by Typhoon Odette (international name: Rai), which struck only two weeks before the first quarter of 2022.

The Department of Agriculture reported that crop damage due to the typhoon amounted to P13.3 billion.

The storm affected 533,709 farmers and fisherfolk across 462,766 hectares of agricultural land, with the volume of lost production at 273,062 metric tons (MT).

Regions mainly affected were Capiz, Iloilo, Negros Occidental, Cebu, Negros Oriental, Eastern Samar, Leyte, Southern Leyte, the Surigao Provinces, Davao de Oro, and Agusan del Sur.

“It will take time for these provinces to fully recover. And this may not happen in the first quarter. These provinces are rice producing areas especially those in Western Visayas which can be

considered the second most important rice producing area after Central Luzon,” Mr. Kempis said.

“Likewise, these affected provinces include rich marine fishing grounds in the bays of Eastern Visayas and Western Visayas. Their marine fishing grounds not only involve fish capture but marine aquaculture. The latter’s sea-based aquaculture farms could have been devastated by the typhoon. Repairs may not be enough but additional capital investment may be necessary. And the latter could be a challenge, albeit temporarily not only in fisheries but also in crops and poultry,” he added.

United Broiler Raisers Association President Elias Jose M. Inciong said that demand was also down in the first quarter because of the Omicron surge and lockdowns in January.

“Producers would have been conservative at the time, especially broiler raisers. Costs were (also) already on the high side even before the Ukraine war,” he said in a Viber message.

Mr. Kempis said that coming from the fourth quarter in 2021, there was a period of enhanced consumption because of the holiday season that also served as an incentive to produce more.

“The first quarter is expected to feature a slowdown in consumption and in turn production, processing and manufacturing of food shall also slow down,” he added. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

GDP,
from S1/1

Rizal Commercial Banking Corp.’s (RCBC) Michael L. Ricafort said in an e-mail that the further reopening of the economy and achieving the lowest quarantine level by March was a step towards “greater normalcy.”

“We think that the economy shrugged off the potential negative impact of the Omicron-related surge in early January as evidenced by the continuing expansion of PH’s PMI (Purchasing Managers’ Index),” said Ruben Carlo O. Asuncion, chief economist from UnionBank of the Philippines, in an e-mail. “Domestic demand has continued to improve, and we think this is so because again of the economy’s reopening.”

The Philippine manufacturing PMI continued to expand this year, hitting a three-year high in March.

Economists are still keeping a close eye on the Russia-Ukraine war and the pandemic in the next few months.

“We think the Philippine economy will continue to normalize for the rest of the year, as activity normalizes amid low (COVID-19) cases and higher vaccination rates. That said, the headwinds facing the domestic economy have risen,” Makoto Tsuchiya, assistant economist from Oxford Economics Japan, said.

Mr. Tsuchiya noted the Philippine economy faces risks arising from elevated global commodity prices, slower vaccination rollout, and recent lockdowns in China that have disrupted supply chains.

UnionBank’s Mr. Asuncion said these factors can weigh on economic recovery.

“With so much uncertainty all over, it is very difficult to determine if the government will hit its 2022 growth target,” UnionBank’s Mr. Asuncion said.

High inflation due to soaring pump prices may hurt consumer spending, which accounts

for around three-fourths of the economy, for the rest of the year.

Bank of the Philippine Islands Lead Economist Emilio S. Neri, Jr. said as long as oil prices remain near current levels, “a return to 2019 output can still be attained by the end of this year.”

“Since the Philippines is still in the midst of exiting from one of the strictest pandemic restrictions in the world, the country’s GDP growth in 2022 will largely be driven by the faster recovery of the businesses hardest hit by the lockdowns,” Philippine National Bank Economist Alvin Joseph A. Arago said.

“As such, the drag of higher inflation on consumer spending due to the Russia-Ukraine war can largely be outweighed by the economic reopening,” he added.

China Banking Corp. Chief Economist Domini S. Velasquez said consumer spending will be “less robust” for the rest of the year due to elevated inflation and supply chain bottlenecks in China.

“External demand will soften as the outlook for global growth dims,” she said.

Meanwhile, S&P Global Market Intelligence APAC Chief Economist Rajiv Biswas said Philippine economic growth will continue to improve this year, driven by domestic demand.

However, the country’s export sector faces headwinds from weaker Europe and China growth, he said. China is one of the country’s top export markets, while the European Union accounts for about 10%.

“This creates a double blow to the Philippines export sector outlook in the near-term,” Mr. Biswas said.

Security Bank Corp.’s Chief Economist Robert Dan J. Roces said the outcome of the upcoming national elections and its new economic team “will be the key in assessing direction of sentiment which in turn affects growth.”

Bandwagon,
from S1/1

in the Filipino psyche,” said Ver Reyes, a psychologist who heads the graduate school of the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Marikina.

“It involves interdependent skills such as *pakikipag-usap* (communications), *pakikinig* (listening) and *pagpupukaw* (awakening),” she said in a Messenger chat. “And these skills entail a strong level of commitment from the campaigners because it is very taxing, physically and mentally.”

Ms. Reyes said it is never easy to deal with people who have picked a candidate, so campaigners should be sensitive and mindful to be able to convert people.

Mr. Marcos kept his 56% score in the Pulse Asia Research, Inc.’s April presidential opinion poll. Ms. Robredo remained at a distant second with 23%.

Her camp said the poll didn’t capture Ms. Robredo’s rally near Manila, the capital that drew a record 400,000 supporters on April 23.

“By now, Robredo campaigners know how to efficiently use their time well — by targeting voters who are seeking more information about Leni and may have not yet decided,” Ms. Reyes said.

Jean Encinas-Franco, a political science professor at the University of the Philippines (UP), said the Robredo campaign is a “master class” in civic education.

“The *tao-sa-tao* campaign is important because it gives voters the validation they need in these uncertain times,” she said in a Messenger chat. “They feel heard and seen.”

On Tuesday night, the Philippine-based religious group Iglesia ni Cristo, whose members have been known to vote as a bloc, endorsed the tandem of Mr. Marcos and his vice-presidential running mate, Davao City Mayor and presidential daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio.

On the other hand, about 1,400 Catholic bishops, priests and deacons announced their support for Ms. Robredo the day after. The church played a key role in two popular street uprisings that toppled two presidents.

In the Philippines, the president and vice-president are

elected separately and may come from different parties.

“It’s useless at this point to expect the other nonadministration candidates to change their minds,” Maria Ela L. Atienza, who also teaches political science at UP, said in a Messenger chat. “But the election is already a two-way race between Robredo and Marcos.”

‘NEW SOCIETY’

The volunteer-driven campaign that has fueled Ms. Robredo’s campaign is a promising and effective way to bypass and challenge the traditional patronage-driven practices of powerful political families, said Temario C. Rivera, who heads the Center for People Empowerment in Governance.

“Nontraditional and progressive politicians will be more receptive to this campaign style since it also frees or weakens their dependence on these same patronage ties.”

The top two presidential bets capped their campaigns in Metro Manila at the weekend, with Ms. Robredo drawing almost 800,000 people at a rally in the financial district of Makati City, according to estimates by her office.

Mr. Marcos held a rally in Parañaque City, where his more than a million supporters — according to his office — sang the modern version of a propaganda jingle used to trumpet his late father’s vision of a new society.

“There’s a new birth, a new life, a new path in the new society,” his supporters sang in Filipino.

Meanwhile, Ms. Robredo thanked her celebrity endorsers, who she said endured the heat and exhaustion during their house-to-house campaign.

“They bet their career and name,” she told the crowd in Filipino. “Despite the exhaustion, you still walked to find the next door. Let’s celebrate this historic campaign this evening. Let’s win this.”

Mr. Quising thinks knocking on doors helped him reach people’s hearts. “The internet as a medium has dehumanized most of our conversations, that’s why it’s important to reach out to ordinary people on the ground.”

Modi faces a dilemma: Keep Indian voters happy or feed the world

A GROWING food security threat is set to push Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi into a conundrum: continue sending wheat to countries hit by dwindling supplies from the war in Ukraine or stockpile food at home to fend off high inflation.

Severe heat waves have damaged wheat yields across the South Asian nation, prompting the government to consider export restrictions, Bloomberg News reported. While the food ministry said it sees no case yet for controlling wheat exports, it’s a question that will gain momentum and carry political

ramifications for Mr. Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

Mr. Modi has sought to burnish his reputation as a dependable global leader, but he faces frustration on home soil about record-high inflation, one issue that brought down the previous government and paved the way for his ascension to power.

“At a time when the world is facing a shortage of wheat, the farmers of India have stepped forward to feed the world,” Mr. Modi said this week at a gathering of the Indian diaspora in Germany. “Whenever humanity is faced with a crisis, India comes up with a solution.”

After the war hampered logistics in the Black Sea region, which accounts for about a quarter of all wheat trade, India has tried to fill the vacuum.

Egypt, the world’s top buyer, recently approved India as a source for wheat imports. Last month, Piyush Goyal, the food and commerce minister, said India hopes to become a permanent exporter of wheat, shipping as much as 15 million tons this year, compared with about 7.2 million in 2021-22. Officials are pushing the World Trade Organization to relax rules so that India can export from state reserves, Mr. Goyal said.

But the country’s domestic challenges have come into sharper focus in recent weeks. Hundreds of acres of wheat crops were damaged during India’s hottest March on record, causing yields to potentially slump by as much as 50% in some pockets of the country, according to a Bloomberg survey. — **Bloomberg**

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HK’s next leader endorsed by pro-Beijing elites

HONG KONG — Hong Kong’s (HK) leader-in-waiting, John Lee, was endorsed for the city’s top job on Sunday by a committee stacked with pro-Beijing loyalists, as the financial hub attempts to relaunch itself after several years of political upheaval.

Mr. Lee, the sole candidate, received the votes of 1,416 members of a pro-Beijing election committee on Sunday morning, granting him the majority required to anoint him as Hong Kong’s next leader. Eight voted to “not support” him.

Few of the city’s 7.4 million people have any say in choosing their leader, despite China’s promises to one day grant full democracy to the former British

colony, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Security was tight around the venue, with police preventing a small group of protesters from approaching.

“We believe we represent many Hong Kong people in expressing opposition to this China-style, single-candidate election,” said Chan Po-ying, a protester with the League of Social Democrats, holding up a banner demanding full democracy.

Mr. Lee, a former Hong Kong secretary for security, has forcefully implemented China’s harsher regime under a national security law that has been used to arrest scores of democrats, disband civil society groups and shutter liberal

media outlets, such as *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*.

He has pledged to relaunch Hong Kong as an international city and bolster its competitiveness, amid concerns among some Western governments, including the United States, that freedoms and the rule of law have been undermined by the security legislation that was imposed by Beijing in 2020.

Chinese authorities say the law is necessary to restore stability after protracted pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Some critics say Mr. Lee’s attempts to relaunch Hong Kong internationally could be affected by sanctions imposed on him by the United States in 2020 over what

Washington said was his role in “being involved in coercing, arresting, detaining, or imprisoning individuals” under the security law.

YouTube owner Alphabet, Inc. has said it took down the Lee campaign’s YouTube account to comply with US sanction laws.

Mr. Lee, who says enacting more national security laws for Hong Kong will be a priority, has often said Hong Kong is a law-abiding society and that everyone must act in accordance with the law.

Among his other priorities, Mr. Lee has said he will restructure the government to bolster policy-making and try to boost housing supply in one of the world’s most expensive housing markets. — **Reuters**

Sinn Fein calls for united Ireland debate after historic election win

BELFAST — Sinn Fein, the former political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), hailed its first victory in a Northern Ireland Assembly election as a “defining moment” for the British-controlled region and called for a debate on a united Ireland.

Sinn Fein was ahead of the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) by 27 to 24 seats with two left to declare, making it the first Irish nationalist party to become the largest in the devolved assembly.

“Today represents a very significant moment of change. It’s a defining moment in our politics and for our people,” said the head of Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland, Michelle O’Neill, whose party secured 29% of first-preference votes to the DUP’s 21.3%.

She said there should now be an “honest debate” around the party’s goal of unifying the territory with the Republic of Ireland.

The victory will not change the region’s status, as the referendum required to leave the United Kingdom is at the discretion of the British government and likely years away.

But the symbolic importance is huge, ending a century of domination by pro-British parties, supported predominantly by the region’s Protestant population.

The DUP, a leading proponent of Britain’s exit from the European Union, saw support undermined in part due to its role in post-Brexit talks between London and Brussels that resulted in trade barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

‘HISTORIC RESULT’

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who is also leading a campaign to secede from the United Kingdom, was among the first to congratulate Sinn Fein in a Twitter post that hailed a “truly historic result.”



THE TITANIC BUILDING and Harland and Wolff cranes are seen in Belfast, Northern Ireland, April 29, 2022.

While the largest party has the right to put forward a candidate for First Minister of Northern Ireland’s compulsory power-sharing government, disagreements with the DUP mean such an appointment could be months away.

Asked by a journalist if she expected to become the region’s first Irish nationalist First Minister, Ms. O’Neill said: “The people have spoken.”

DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said his party would not join the government unless the protocol governing Northern Ireland’s trade with the rest of the UK following its exit from the European Union was totally overhauled.

The DUP’s campaign focused on a promise to scrap what it calls a border in the Irish Sea.

Mr. Donaldson said he would see what British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says on the topic in a speech next week before deciding his next move.

The British government’s minister for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis in a statement called on

the parties to form an executive as soon as possible.

Sinn Fein was long shunned by the political establishment on both sides of the Irish border for its links to Irish Republican Army violence during three decades of fighting over Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom that ended with a 1998 peace deal.

Since then it has reinvented itself to become the most popular party in the Republic of Ireland, where it has carved out a successful base by campaigning on everyday issues such as the cost of living and healthcare.

It followed a similar path in the Northern Irish elections, where it focused on economic concerns rather than Irish unity to appeal to middle-ground voters.

The election follows demographic trends that have long indicated that pro-British Protestant parties would eventually be eclipsed by predominantly Catholic Irish nationalist parties who favor uniting the north with the Republic of Ireland. — **Reuters**