

Ex-MNLF bases awaiting OIC farm investments

FORMER BASES operated by the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) have been declared "peace zones" ready to accept agriculture investments from Muslim countries, according to an MNLF leader who is also a member of the Bangsamoro government.

"Since there is peace now in these areas, we are optimistic that investors from member-countries of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) will soon come in to invest in viable ventures," MNLF Central Committee Chair Muslimin G. Sema said on Friday following a meeting with Acting Presidential Peace Adviser Isidro L. Purisima.

Mr. Sema, the labor minister of the Bangsamoro Autonomous

Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), said the former camps are suitable for large-scale propagation of corn, soybeans, or Cavendish bananas for export.

MNLF has blocs in the region's provinces in mainland Mindanao as well as the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. The "peace zones" have been demilitarized and have been set up to become agricultural development sites.

The OIC, a global bloc of Muslim countries that includes petroleum-exporting states in the Middle East and North Africa, helped broker the Philippine government's separate peace agreements with the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

At the meeting, capped off by an *iftar* or the first meal after a day-long Ramadhan fast, Mr. Sema reaffirmed the MNLF's commitment to supporting the peace process and economic development programs in the Bangsamoro region, with governance led by the MILF.

"The Moro issue in Mindanao is best addressed via diplomatic and political interventions. We cherish our final peace agreement with the National Government," Mr. Sema said.

The MNLF and the National Government forged on Sept. 2, 1996 a final peace agreement that ended the group's more than two decades of secessionist activities in provinces that now comprise BARMM.

The MILF, on the other hand, has two compacts with Malacañang, the 2012 Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro and the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro.

The two agreements came after 22 years of government-MILF peace talks that paved the way for the creation of BARMM in 2019, replacing the then 29-year-old Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Former MILF camps are also in the process of transformation via agricultural and non-agricultural livelihood training for inhabitants, and improving access to basic services and social infrastructure.

The MNLF has representatives in the 80-seat MILF-led BARMM parliament. — **John M. Unson**



PRESIDENTIAL Peace Adviser Isidro L. Purisima (right) and Bangsamoro Labor Minister Muslimin G. Sema, also the central committee chair of the Moro National Liberation Front, during their engagement on April 14 in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Sur.



Banana growers see exports declining

PRODUCTION of Cavendish bananas, the main export variety, remains threatened by Fusarium wilt or Panama disease, likely dampening exports, according to the Pilipino Banana Growers and Exporters Association (PBGEA).

"For the first three months, our production was even worse than last year. We're kind of worried that maybe at the end of this year, we might not be able to contribute even \$1 billion," PBGEA Executive Director Stephen A. Antig told *BusinessWorld* in a virtual interview.

Citing the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the total land area planted to banana was 442,894 hectares last year, with 84,328 hectares dedicated to Cavendish, which is cultivated in large plantations for efficiency.

Mr. Antig said that about 15,000 banana plantations were hit by the disease, while the Department of Agriculture is currently monitoring the affected land area to arrive at a production estimate.

Fusarium wilt is a soil-borne fungal disease that attaches to banana plants, blocking the plant's vascular system and depriving it of minerals, nutrients, and moisture. Affected plants turn yellow until they die.

"When you're hit with this disease, it will stay in the soil as long as 30 years. *Habang nandiyan siya sa soil* (while it is in the soil), you cannot plant the same varieties because they will be destroyed," Mr. Antig said.

Mar de Guzman, officer-in-charge of Plant Health and Pest Status Section in the Bureau of Plant Industry, said that the Fusarium wilt strain

called Tropical Race 4 (TR4) was first recorded in Davao City in 2009.

So far, this fungal strain is only present in the Mindanao region. Other types of Fusarium wilt have also been detected in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), the Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon region (Calabarzon), the Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan, region (Mimaropa), the Central Visayas, the Eastern Visayas, and the South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani, and General Santos (Soccskargen) region.

"*Iniiwasan natin 'yong kumalat 'yong Tropical Race 4, so nagkaroon tayo ng quarantine measures at least hindi makaabot sa Luzon* (We're trying to quarantine TR4 so it does not hit Luzon)," he said via Facebook Messenger chat.

Last year, banana output was 9.013 million metric tons (MMT) which was the lowest since 2020 when the Philippines produced 9.056 MMT, according to the PSA.

Banana exports totaled 2.24 MMT in 2022, down 6.21%, according to preliminary data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

"*Baka nga ma-swerte na kami to hit 2 million (MT) (We would be lucky to hit 2 million MT) this year*," Mr. Antig said.

The value of banana exports dipped to \$1.09 billion from \$1.14 billion in the previous year, the FAO said.

"In 2022, the value of the total exports was about \$1.09 billion, *medyo maliit 'yun, bumagsak 'yun* (that is small and reflects a sharp decline). I would say our peak season was in 2019," said Mr. Antig.

In 2019, the volume of exports was 4.35 MMT, valued at about \$1.95 billion, according to the FAO.

Guatemala recently surpassed the Philippines as the number two banana exporter in the world with 2.45 MMT in 2022.

"The only way to survive in this industry is if you're big and the reason for that is because most of the production costs are fixed," Mr. Antig said.

According to Mr. Antig, small and medium-sized banana producers who cannot rehabilitate their land or those who do not have easy access to financing either abandon bananas or shift to other commodities resistant to the disease such as coffee, cacao, and corn.

"We are actually trying to develop a new variety that is resistant to the Fusarium wilt but so far we have not really been successful in producing or developing one that is totally resistant," he said.

He called for the establishment of a research center to combat the disease.

"For the last 10-11 years since we discovered this outbreak of Fusarium wilt, we have been pestering the government to put up a research center because on our own we cannot afford to establish one," Mr. Antig said.

He said legislators attempted several times to file a bill seeking to establish a banana research institute. "Probably *hindi nakita ng ibang mambabatas* (Other legislators failed to see its) importance to Mindanao, that's why it did not pass first reading."

The Davao Region accounts for about 36% of total banana production with 3.29 MMT in 2022, Mr. Antig said. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Cold chain industry says more storage to raise viability of farm businesses

MORE cold storage facilities will help make farming businesses more economically viable, by preserving bumper crops for processing or sale beyond the harvest season, a cold chain industry official said.

"Technically speaking, most food commodities improve their economic viability through cold chain intervention," according to Anthony S. Dizon, president of the Cold Chain Association of the Philippines.

In an e-mail, Mr. Dizon added: "The primary factors are protection of food safety, extension of useful product life, and minimization of food waste."

Cold storage facilities preserve fruits and vegetables as well as seafood and meat products until they are ready for market. They reduce post-harvest losses for the farmers, who gain the ability to meet demand even when supply dips over the course of the year.

Asked about possible partnership between the private sector and the government to build more cold storage facilities, Mr. Dizon said that "the possibilities are always there but realistic implementation will depend on the terms of reference."

According to the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Center, projects eligible for PPP

implementation include the building of storage and processing facilities, with PPPs governed by the Build-Operate-Transfer Law.

"These can be wholly or partly financed, constructed, and operated by private sector partners," it said.

Mr. Dizon said that the private sector can provide technical assistance in the design, as well as on the construction of the facilities and selection of equipment.

"Viability of investment in cold chain infrastructure is always anchored on the supposition that all components of the supply chain will be functioning in synchrony, from production to distribution and consumption," he said.

Department of Agriculture (DA) Deputy Spokesman Rex C. Estoperez said on the sidelines of a briefing that the DA is open to partnerships with the private sector.

"We can save on budget resources via partnerships. We can redirect our resources to those priority areas that the President wants to allocate funds to," he said.

Mr. Dizon added that building cold storage facilities will require "the availability of support infrastructure such as ports, roads and electric power supply." — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**



The Electrical Installation and Maintenance (EIM) facility, tools, and equipment were turned over by Aboitiz Foundation President and COO Maribeth Marasigan (3rd from right) and Davao Light Assistant Vice President Orville Lazaro (2nd from right) to TESDA led by Davao Provincial Director Adonis F. Culas (3rd from left).

Davao Light aids skills training initiatives in home city

Aboitiz Power Corporation (AboitizPower) subsidiary Davao Light and Power Co., Inc. (Davao Light) continues to encourage education and self-improvement as it undertook efforts to help upskill members of its host community to enable growth and enterprise development.

In partnership with the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), Davao Light mobilized its resources for the purpose of building education and employment opportunities in Davao City.

In March, it donated a renovated Electrical Installation and Maintenance (EIM) facility accompanied by the relevant tools and equipment — collectively worth P2.4 million — to the Provincial Training Center of TESDA at Tugbok District, Davao City.

The project, which is also supported by the Aboitiz Foundation Inc. (Aboitiz Foundation), is aimed at promoting the development and creation of more skilled electricians from the area. As cities undertake deeper electrification and innovation initiatives — including Davao City's own underground cabling project — the development of a greater number of competent electrical workers becomes more significant, especially with the expansion of better and safer electrical infrastructure.

With the EIM facility, course takers will have a safer and more conducive learning environment. The provided tools and materials will supplement the learning of fire alarm, closed-circuit television (CCTV), and telephone systems. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is also provided, in line with the practice of safety standards.

This is the second EIM facility donated to TESDA after the first one was installed at the TESDA Regional Training Center - Korea Philippines Training Center in Tibungco, Davao City. Davao Light has been in partnership with TESDA since 2015.

In the same month, 26 members of consumer cooperative Samahan ng

may iba't-ibang Kakayahan sa Dabaw (SAKADAB) from the Gawad Kalinga community in Los Amigos, Tugbok District, Davao City received their national certification (NC II) in dressmaking.

The SAKADAB members upskilled their sewing capabilities during a 35-day training, which was done during the weekends spread out from December 2022 to March 2023. Aside from dressmaking, the graduates will also soon undergo packaging and branding training.

The training was launched after a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for the Cooperative Capacity Building Project was signed by SAKADAB Consumer Cooperative, Davao Light, and Aboitiz Foundation last October 2022.

The consumer cooperative also received a sewing business package worth P300,000 — which included four sewing machines, as well as other tools, materials, and supplies — that added to SAKADAB's existing income-generating projects, namely, baking bread and pastries and selling goods. Previously, Davao Light and Aboitiz Foundation provided support to SAKADAB's business when it was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic via the donation of baking materials.

Its support of SAKADAB dates back to when Aboitiz employees helped build their houses in Gawad Kalinga. Since 2012, the cooperative has been a recipient of various volunteer activities and projects that build the capacity of its differently-abled members.

Course takers, both in EIM and dressmaking, are deemed ready for work or employment once they pass the TESDA's National Competency Assessment and obtain an NC II.

Davao Light takes pride in giving rise to solutions that help enrich people's lives, hence contributing to the Aboitiz Group's vision of advancing business and communities.

Mobile testing labs to join ASF containment effort this year

BIOASSETS Corp., an animal health diagnostics company, said it is building up to six mobile biocontainment laboratories in 2023 to address a gap in the market for such services in the hog industry, which is currently dealing with an outbreak of African Swine Fever (ASF).

The company said the mobile labs can help local government units (LGUs) surveil diseases and respond to outbreaks upon detection.

The mobile laboratory project is supported by the Department of Science and Technology's Science for Change Program, which hopes to harness innovation in science and technology.

The lab is the first of its kind in the Philippines and can serve between 5 and 10 farms per day for diagnostic testing. It is also equipped with a biocontainment facility for handling infectious diseases.

"The mobile labs will allow LGUs to protect the livelihood of many

livestock producers, be they small or large scale," according to Homer D. Pantua, president and co-founder of BioAssets.

"Protecting their livelihoods translates to supporting food security," he said in an e-mail.

The company is also developing a platform that can perform polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing in 15-20 minutes, with "comparable accuracy" to the standard, real-time PCR.

"We are in talks with several LGUs who have expressed interest in the platform," Mr. Pantua told *BusinessWorld*, adding that each of these labs costs about P27 million, including starter kits. "They appreciate the potential contribution of the (lab) in addressing disease outbreaks in livestock and in protecting the livelihood of their constituents."

While the initial plan is to serve hog and poultry breeders in Bukid-

non, the company hopes to eventually supply its mobile labs to all 82 provincial veterinary offices.

In a March interview, a former Agriculture department consultant on ASF said farmers need better access to confirmatory tests for the disease.

"A lot of LGUs have very limited access to the confirmatory tests," Fermín M. Diaz said.

The scarcity of testing facilities prolongs the time to confirm a diagnosis, he added. "*Tantsiyahan na lang* (They end up having to guess)."

The Bureau of Animal Industry reported the presence of ASF in more than three-fourths of the country's provinces as of April 3.

The ASF genome was published by the BioAssets team in November 2022. This information, according to Mr. Pantua, will guide diagnostics design as well as vaccine development.

The first ASF outbreak was recorded in the Philippines in July 2019. — **Patricia B. Mirasol**