

Gov't urged to expedite creation of bird flu IATF

THE GOVERNMENT needs to fast-track the creation of an inter-agency task force (IATF) that will oversee efforts to contain animal diseases and the potential human-to-human transmission of avian influenza (AI), an industry official said.

"You need teamwork for the worst-case scenario. You cannot build teamwork overnight," Unit-

ed Broiler Raisers Association President Elias Jose M. Inciong told reporters.

He said agencies must be identified immediately to develop a plan to address animal diseases and other issues affecting the livestock and poultry industry.

Mr. Inciong said the industry has had talks with the Depart-

ment of Agriculture (DA) but would like to meet with the Department of Health to discuss the potential of human-to-human transmission of type H3N8 AI.

"There should be an inter-agency (task force). We're not saying that this will be an active group. *Kailangang magkakilala na muna* (They need to designate

which agencies will act first) and discuss the plans," Mr. Inciong said.

A DA special order dated May 25 proposed a task force to address issues affecting the poultry industry.

The functions to be performed by the task force include evaluating prices and poultry supply and demand. However,

it does not address action to be taken in the event of a disease outbreak.

"(The creation of a task force) will bring confidence to the situation... those who want to invest in layers or broilers... will have confidence with a system in place," said Mr. Inciong.

In February, the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) allotted

P177.78 million in funding for 2023 to the government's Avian Influenza Protection Program, which will roll out mitigating measures in the event of an AI outbreak.

As of May 30, two regions, two provinces, four municipalities, and seven barangays had active HPAI cases, the BAI reported. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Indonesia accuses EU of 'regulatory imperialism' with deforestation law

JAKARTA — Indonesia sees the European Union (EU) as conducting "regulatory imperialism" with its new deforestation law, but both sides will still engage in talks on a free trade agreement (FTA), an Indonesian minister said.

Southeast Asia's biggest economy will continue negotiations for a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) with the bloc, alongside separate consultations to resolve disputes on the EU's deforestation rules, Airlangga Hartarto, Indonesia's chief economic minister told Reuters.

Jakarta wants to close a deal on the FTA soon after seven years of deliberations, Mr. Airlangga said, but stressed Indonesia "can wait another seven years" if the EU was unwilling to recognize existing export standards, like those on sustainable palm oil and wood products, under the deforestation rules.

"We're discussing trade facilitation ... But in parallel, they're building walls. This is not fair," said Mr. Airlangga, who raised the issue in Brussels last week together with Malaysia's deputy prime minister.

Mr. Airlangga cited ongoing disputes with the EU, including its complaint at the World Trade Organization (WTO) over Indonesia's nickel ore export ban and a separate WTO case that Indonesia filed over the EU's phasing out of palm oil as biofuel feedstock.

The bloc's carbon tax plans could also hit Indonesian nickel products, Mr. Airlangga said, describing EU rules as "regulatory imperialism."

A European Commission spokesperson said the EU was aware of the deforestation law concerns and assured the rules would not be discriminatory or used as disguised trade restrictions.

"The CEPA with Indonesia will include a platform for cooperation on shared challenges such



REUTERS

as deforestation," the spokesperson said, adding negotiations were scheduled for next month.

Malaysia has said the dispute over the EU law will have no bearing on its stalled EU FTA negotiations.

The law, passed by the European parliament in April, bans EU imports of a range of commodities linked to forest destruction.

Indonesia has the world's third largest area of rainforest. It is also the world's biggest palm oil exporter and a major global supplier of coffee, cocoa, rubber and timber products.

About 6 billion euro (\$6.44 billion) of its annual exports will be affected by the deforestation law, Mr. Airlangga said.

Indonesia argues the law will hurt small palm oil farmers, hampering efforts to reach its sustainable development goals, as farmers will struggle to comply with geolocation rules.

It also fears being labeled as a "high risk" country could lead to more costly inspections for its products.

The government has said the rate of deforestation has declined, but environmentalists say some farmers and companies still clear forests for palm oil cultivation.

Indonesia is also among the world's top 10 biggest carbon emitters, largely due to forest and peatland clearance.

Separately, Mr. Airlangga said Indonesia has also proposed for the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to include a trade agreement on critical minerals, so companies operating in Indonesia can benefit from US tax credits.

That proposal, which he said had been endorsed by other Southeast Asian countries and Australia, came after Indonesia said it would propose a limited FTA with the US covering battery materials. — **Reuters**



OLIVER THORN

Palay farmgate prices up 2.1% in March

THE average farmgate price of palay or unmilled rice rose 2.1% month on month to P18.57 per kilogram in March, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

This brought the first-quarter average to P18.17 per kilo, an increase of 3.9% from the fourth quarter, according to the PSA.

"Compared with the P17.43 average price per kilogram in the first quarter of 2022, this quarter's average farmgate price of palay registered an annual increase of 4.2%," the PSA said in its preliminary report.

"The highest average farmgate price for this quarter was recorded in Ilocos Region at P19.81 per kilogram, while the lowest was recorded in Caraga at P16.91 per kilogram," it added.

The palay farmgate price rose 6.5% year on year, with all regions reporting price increases.

"All regions recorded positive year-on-year growth rates in March 2023. Ilocos Region posted the highest annual increase of 11.6%, while Northern Mindanao registered the lowest year-on-year increment of 0.5%," the PSA said.

Ilocos Region farmgate prices during the period rose to P20.83 per kilo from P19.58 in February and P18.67 a year earlier.

The average farmgate price in Cordillera Administrative Region grew 10.3% year on year to P18.87.

Farmgate prices in Cagayan Valley climbed 11.4% year on year to P19.38.

Eastern Visayas farmgate prices were at P16.49, up 8.3% year on year. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

US bans imports from China-based Ninestar over Uyghurs

THE US on Friday banned imports from China-based printer maker Ninestar Corp. and a Chinese chemical company over alleged human rights abuses.

Ninestar, whose website says it is the world's fourth-largest laser printer manufacturer, and Xingjiang Zhongtai Chemical, are being kept out of the US supply chain for participating in business practices that target China's Uyghurs and other persecuted groups, the US Homeland Security Department (DHS) said.

The companies could not immediately be reached for comment.

UN experts and rights groups estimate that over a million people, mainly Uyghurs and Muslim minorities, have been detained in camps in China's western Xinjiang region in recent years, with many saying they were subject to ideological training and abuse.

China has denied all accusations of abuse.

The chairs of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China — Representative Chris Smith and Senator Jeff Merkley — said the action "is important because it offers clear guid-

ance to American companies for supply-chain mapping" but said forced labor like "car parts, solar panels, rayon, and garments" continue to enter the US market.

DHS said the actions were taken as part of the US Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act (UFLPA), which was signed into law in December 2021. The act prohibits imports into the US that are either produced in Xinjiang or by companies identified on an UFLPA Entity List, unless the importer can prove the goods were not produced with forced labor.

Twenty-two companies are now on the list, and DHS said it has examined over \$1.3 billion worth of goods likely manufactured with forced labor nearly a year after the UFLPA was implemented.

Ninestar and its eight Zhuhai-based subsidiaries, along with Xinjiang Zhongtai Chemical, were added to the list for working with the government of Xinjiang to recruit, transport, transfer, harbor or receive forced labor of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, or members of other persecuted groups, out of Xinjiang, according to the posting. — **Reuters**

Argentina's annual inflation seen hitting 149% this year — central bank

BUENOS AIRES — Analysts polled by Argentina's central bank forecast annual inflation this year at 149%, above the 126% expected in the previous poll, according to the monthly survey released on Friday.

For May, the analysts polled expect prices to have risen 9% in the month. Inflation in April was 8.4%, according to Argentina's national statistics agency.

Argentina's economy, strained by a historic drought that has worsened an ongoing currency crisis, is expected to shrink 3%

in 2023 from 2022, the survey found.

Analysts see the weakened Argentine peso, currently officially valued at 245 pesos per dollar, ending this year at 408.68 pesos per dollar and 2024 at 917.54 pesos per dollar.

Rising prices and tumbling foreign reserves pose a challenge for Argentina's left-leaning government ahead of general elections in October.

The central bank's survey was conducted among 38 participants between May 29-31. — **Reuters**

France strong-arms big food companies into cutting prices

PARIS — French shoppers should pay less for their food from next month, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on Friday, after he secured a pledge from 75 food companies including Unilever to cut prices on hundreds of products.

The companies, which together make 80% of what the French eat, could face financial sanctions if they don't follow through, Mr. Le Maire said.

The government is furious that supermarket prices have hit record levels in recent months even though the costs of many raw materials used by food producers have been declining.

Improved harvest prospects have helped push the United Nations' index of world food commodity prices to a two-year low.

France's finance minister has previously threatened to claw back what he described as "undue" profits from food companies with special taxes if they did not pass on their own lower costs to consumers already struggling with high energy bills.

"As soon as July, prices of certain products will go down," Mr. Le Maire told BFM TV on Friday, after meeting food industry representatives a day earlier.



ALICE TRIGUET-UNSPASH

"There will be checks and there will be sanctions for those who don't abide by the rules."

Mr. Le Maire said pasta, poultry and vegetable oil were among products on which prices will be cut. The costs of beef, pork and milk would not be affected by the move, he said.

While the pace of food price rises has been slowing across the euro zone, it is the main factor keeping inflation high. The European Central Bank, which is expected to raise interest rates again next week even though growth is very weak, has said high corporate profit margins are also an inflation risk.

Euro zone inflation fell more than expected in May but is

still more than three times the ECB's 2% target.

High food prices are a concern for European governments from Britain to Italy, but France has been among the most aggressive in pushing price cuts. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has imposed mandatory price cuts on some basic food items.

Supermarket chains across Europe say shoppers are voting with their feet and opting for cheaper private label alternatives to branded food products.

France's Carrefour has an "anti-inflation button" on its website that shows customers cheaper alternatives to products, often pointing them to own-brand groceries.

According to a survey by Euro-monitor, 22% of Europeans said they plan to increase their purchase of private label products in 2023, up 5 percentage points from last year.

NAME AND SHAME

Mr. Le Maire said if the food companies do not live up to their promise to cut prices, he could publicly "name and shame" them.

"On a certain number of products where wholesale prices have fallen, then the (retail) prices will have to fall too, by 2, 3, 5, maybe even 10%," he said, adding that he would have a full list of products affected this week.

Unilever, the maker of Hellmann's mayonnaise and Knorr soup, said it was one of the 75 companies the government said should cut prices next month.

"We confirm our participation in ongoing discussions with the Ministry of the Economy and all stakeholders, including retailers, to identify the best actions to serve the purchasing power of the French, in this context of high inflation," a Unilever spokesperson told Reuters.

French supermarket industry association FCD welcomed the government's intervention, but said most food companies

have so far refused to renegotiate prices.

Grocer Auchan declined to comment, while Nestlé, Danone, Kraft Heinz and PepsiCo did not have an immediate comment.

French annual inflation cooled more than expected in May to its lowest level in a year at 6.0% as energy and food price increases moderated. But food prices were still up 14% last month.

March saw a record spike of almost 16% in French food prices after food companies and big retailers agreed an average 10% increase in prices, responding to a surge in input costs after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and to higher wages.

Higher costs have hit appetites among the food-loving French, whose spending on food, adjusting for inflation, has fallen to its lowest level since March 2009, according to data from the INSEE statistics agency.

The food industry has meanwhile seen profits surge, largely making up for sharp falls during the pandemic, Mr. Le Maire said. The industry's operating profits were up 15% in the first quarter from the previous quarter, INSEE data shows. — **Reuters**

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