

# Suspensions lifted for 24 NFA staff in rice sale probe

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Sunday that 24 employees of the National Food Authority (NFA) had their suspensions lifted, with the initial findings against them ruled to have been based on erroneous data.

In a statement, the DA said the two dozen employees were among the 141 NFA employees who had been sus-

pending by the Office of the Ombudsman over the irregular sale of NFA inventories.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said he hopes the Ombudsman will allow more NFA staff to return to work.

"We hope that more suspensions will be lifted in due time so that NFA

operations will normalize," Mr. Laurel said.

Ombudsman Samuel R. Martires was quoted as saying that the suspensions were lifted after it found erroneous data on the list of employees provided by the department.

Mr. Laurel said that the DA only forwarded the list it received from the NFA

without verifying its accuracy because of the urgency of the request.

"The list was given to us by the NFA, and we just forwarded it to the Ombudsman, believing that (it) is current and up-to-date," Mr. Laurel said.

The Ombudsman had questioned the transactions involving the disposal of rice stocks because NFA officials had "uni-

laterally select(ed) the commercial rice traders/millers/buyers" participating in the sale.

The NFA, a government-owned and -controlled corporation, is required to sell old rice in inventory at up to a 10% discount to the mandated price of between P22.5 and P25 per kilo. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

## PSA raises Q1 palay, corn output estimate

PRODUCTION of palay, or unmilled rice, and corn are estimated to rise in the first quarter, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

In a March 15 report, the PSA said palay output for the three months to March was estimated to increase 1.1% year on year to 4.83 million metric tons (MT), based on the standing crop as of Feb. 1.

The projection compares with the 4.78 million MT estimate for the year-earlier period and is also 0.6% higher than the earlier estimate of 4.8 million MT issued on Jan. 1.

However, the PSA estimates a decline in the harvest area for rice of 0.1% to 1.17 million hectares, while the yield per hectare of palay is estimated to have risen 1.2% to 4.11 MT.

The PSA said about 318,570 hectares or 27.1% of the 1.17 million hectares planted to rice have been harvested as of Feb. 1, with the resulting palay output at 1.29 million MT.

Some 856,310 hectares of palay have yet to be harvested, with 6.7% at the vegetative stage, 56.9% at the reproductive stage, and 36.5% at the maturing stage.

Meanwhile, corn production for the period is estimated to increase 5.9% to 2.67 million MT.

This represents a 0.8% downgrade from the 2.69 million MT estimate issued on Jan. 1.

The harvest area for corn is estimated to increase 2.5% to 711,470 hectares, while yield per hectare is estimated to increase 3.3% to 3.75 MT.

As of Feb. 1, 32.2% of the 711,470 hectares have been harvested, equivalent to 723,270 MT of corn output.

"Of the 482,130 hectares of standing corn yet to be harvested as of Feb. 1, about 2.2% were at the vegetative stage, 51.8% at the reproductive stage, and 46.0% at the maturing stage," the PSA said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

## Dam water levels deemed 'safe' as El Niño matures

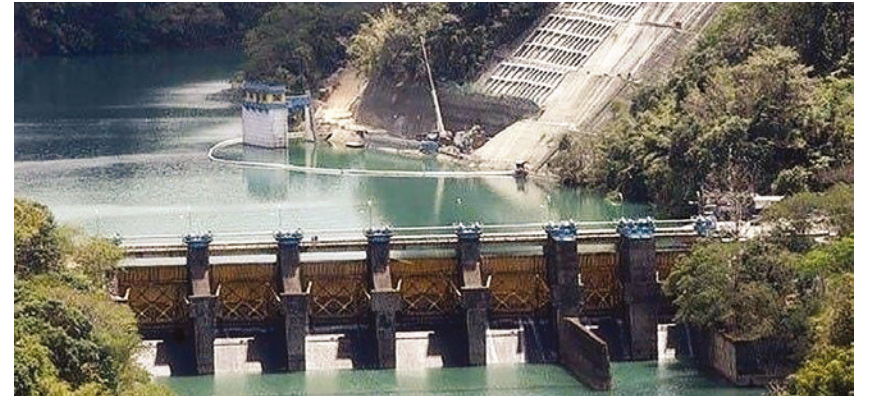
THE water levels in reservoirs are at "safe levels" with an adequate margin available before Metro Manila's main source of water hits the critical mark, a Palace communications official said on Sunday.

Assistant Secretary for Radio of the Presidential Communications Office Jose Maria M. Villarama II told *BusinessWorld* on the sidelines of a briefing that according to Task Force El Niño, "Angat Dam's critical level is 180 meters, but right now we're at around 200," he said.

"What we're experiencing now is a strong and mature El Niño," he said.

Damage to agriculture has been estimated at P1.31 billion, which Mr. Villarama described as low compared to 2009, when the losses hit a record P17 billion.

Asked about agricultural workers affected by El Niño, Mr. Villarama said the Task Force and the Departments of Social Welfare and Development and Labor and Employment are offering a cash-for-work program.



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"We help them earn money through short-term jobs, such as construction, fixing of irrigation canals, or gardening," he said.

More than 24,000 farmers and fisherfolk have been affected by dry conditions across more than 25,000 hectares in seven regions. The Task Force estimates that 70 provinces will be affected by El Niño.

At the same briefing, Mr. Villarama said La Niña has a 55% chance of starting as early as June.

He added that the government is not confident that the rainfall will offset the damage from the dry conditions.

"The first 2-3 months of La Niña are likely to (have) below-normal rainfall," Mr. Villarama told *BusinessWorld* via Viber. — **Chloe Mari A. Hufana**

## Farmers express support for legislation creating cold-storage network

A BILL proposing to create a cold-storage network received support from farmers, who said they welcomed the opportunity to reduce post-harvest losses.

House Bill (HB) No. 10087 targets food-producing areas as potential locations for the facilities with the goal of reducing the post-harvest loss rate of about 30% for vegetables and 50% for meat and fish.

"Cold storage facilities can help reduce post-harvest losses by providing proper storage and

preservation of perishable goods such as fruits, vegetables, and meat products," according to the bill's explanatory note.

Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura Executive Director Jayson H. Cainglet said that cold facilities allow farmers to hold their perishable produce for longer without any deterioration in quality.

"This would help farmers (avoid market price disruptions during the harvest)," Mr. Cainglet told *BusinessWorld* by phone. "Cold storage facilities allow

farmers to store their produce, allowing them to release their products slowly and without disrupting market prices."

He said abundance of agricultural products during harvest season reduces their profits, sometimes even forcing farmers to "sell at a loss... due to lack of access to cold storage facilities."

Raul Q. Montemayor, national manager of the Federation of Free Farmers, said that "inventory financing" should also be added to the proposed measure so that

"farmers can borrow much-needed money" to sustain their operations while waiting for prices of agricultural goods to go up during the off-season.

Mr. Cainglet also said that the absence of other facilities contributes to post-harvest losses: "logistics, warehousing, silos. If farmers don't have access to these, there will indeed be losses."

It has to be a "complete system in order for the (measure) to work for farmers," adding that logistics systems should also be consid-

ered to strengthen "marketing linkages" to "bring stored stocks to buyers," Mr. Montemayor told *BusinessWorld* via Viber.

A report from the Cold Chain Association of the Philippines noted that meat and fish products dominate demand for cold storage. Meat and fish products occupy at least 60% of cold storage sites by floor area.

To boost participation from the private sector, the bill also stipulates that private cold chain operators would be offered incentives like tax holidays, exemp-

tions, discounts, subsidies, and other forms of financial assistance for investing in such facilities.

The proposed measure tasks the Departments of Agriculture and Trade and Industry to ensure that cold storage sites "contain goods processing rooms and such equipment such as blast freezers and ice plant components," according to Section 3 of the bill.

HB No. 10087 has been with the House Committee on Agriculture and Food since March 13. — **Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio**

## Home Credit sees strong demand for e-bike, air conditioner loans

CONSUMER finance provider Home Credit Philippines said it is experiencing strong loan application volumes for customers seeking to purchase electric bikes (e-bikes) and air conditioners on credit.

In a briefing, Sheila A. Paul, chief marketing officer of Home Credit, said that customers use the e-bikes for their businesses, while new air conditioners are being bought for sustainability reasons.

"Our up-and-coming product, actually, ever since the pandemic, was laptops. And this year, our up-and-coming products are e-bikes and air conditioners," Ms. Paul said on Friday.

However, she said that this does not include motorcycles, which are still not eligible for Home Credit loans.

"But if ever we go into it, it would be (one of our) highest-value items. Because if you compare, some iPhones cost as much," she said.

The top product in terms of financing applications remains mobile phones, followed by televisions.

In 2023, the company acquired 1.1 million new customers, which brought its total customer base to 10.4 million, with more than half of them women.

Ms. Paul said that according to a study conducted by the company, wives and mothers are the main purchasing decision-makers in families.

"We found out that in the segment we're targeting, the decision-makers are really women. So it's either the wives or the mothers who are consulted on these kinds of purchases," she added.

She said the average amount borrowed from Home Credit ranges from P15,000 to P20,000.

"And then we actually ask for a 20-30% down payment, so you can imagine the prices of the products they are purchasing through us," she added.

Asked about the company's outlook this year, she said that: "Actually, for us, 2023 was a good year. But we want to be conservative for 2024. Because there's still so much happening globally." — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

## DoE considering new norms for energy-efficiency compliance

THE Department of Energy (DoE) said it is considering new energy-efficiency standards for privately owned buildings.

"Maybe in a couple of years, we'll be coming out with a building energy efficiency index, a benchmark (based on) the particular activity of the private company," Patrick T. Aquino, director of the DoE's Energy Utilization Management Bureau, told reporters last week.

Mr. Aquino said that the DoE is also considering a fleet fuel efficiency standard, equivalent to the corporate average fuel economy standard for vehicle manufacturers.

He said the team studying the new standards is currently in the data-collection stage.

"That's something that we will ultimately have in place, but we will not put that in place until we've collected sufficient data," Mr. Aquino said.

In a memorandum circular issued in 2020, the DoE requires designated establishments to submit an annual energy utilization report and annual energy efficiency and conservation report.

"What we're monitoring in terms of compliance in their reports is their own set targets. So, the government is not yet mandating them to, with a specific target in mind,

but they have to set their own targets at this point," Mr. Aquino said.

In January, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. issued Administrative Order No. 15 to accelerate the implementation of the Government Energy Management Program (GEMP).

GEMP is aimed to reduce the government's electricity and fuel consumption by at least 10% through energy efficiency and conservation initiatives.

"The DoE, through monitoring teams, will be doing spot checks to determine compliance," Mr. Aquino said in relation to GEMP. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

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